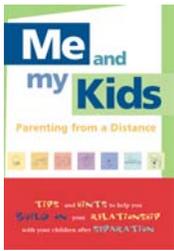


Me, my kids and my Ex

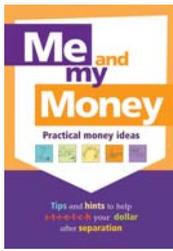
Forming a workable relationship
for the benefit of your children



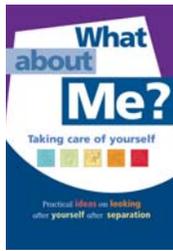
TIPS and **HINTS** on
SURVIVING SEPARATION



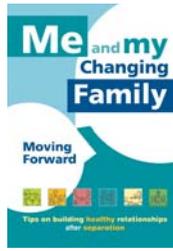
Practical ideas on developing and maintaining relationships with your kids after separation; in particular for parents who spend much of their time away from their children.



Addresses the challenges that arise around money issues following separation. Includes hints and tips on stretching your dollar further.



Helping separated people deal with emotional issues such as anxiety with suggestions and resources for dealing with them.



Deals with issues that affect separated families when parents re-partner. Includes tips on building healthy relationships after separation.



An interactive CD Rom where real people in real situations share their experiences, tips and tools about navigating their way through separation.

Disclaimer

The information in this publication is provided as a guide only on the understanding that the Australian Government is not providing professional advice. The Child Support Agency recommends that users seek professional advice for their particular circumstances.

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Australian Government

Child Support Agency

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

Children benefit from the love and support of both parents. Making parenting decisions, providing education, looking after their health and providing a home will require you to both work together for the benefit of your children.

'We're not together anymore — so why do we now have to develop a good relationship?'

The most important reason is your children.

Developing a good relationship with the other parent after you have separated isn't easy. This book provides help through:

- Practical ideas on relationship building
- Hints and tips
- Experiences from other parents
- Details on useful contacts for seeking extra help

A WORD OF ADVICE

Separation is often a time of conflict between parents. Where **violence** and **abusive behaviour** is present — attempts to develop a working relationship with the other parent may not be possible. Seek professional help if you are affected.



Extra help can be found at the end of this book listed under *Useful Contacts*.

WHAT'S GOING ON?

Flip through the book to read the sections that relate to you at this time.

PAUSE

Are you:

- Angry?
- Depressed?
- Hurt?
- Fighting all the time?

Try starting with...

- Pages 1–5** which help you to deal with your emotions first.
- Pages 19–20** which talk about the causes of conflict.

PROCEED WITH CAUTION

Are you:

- Talking with your ex but things could be better?
- Falling into the same old arguments?
- Not putting your kids first all the time?

Look at...

- Page 16** for tips on effective communication.
- Page 24** for ideas about parenting after separation.
- Pages 25–33** for suggestions on parenting arrangements.

MOVE FORWARD

Are you:

- Feeling a lot better than you did when you first separated?
- Keen to make the best of the situation for your kids?
- Looking for ways to keep being better parents together?

Ways to move forward...

- Pages 10–15** helps you to build a working relationship that focuses on your kids.
- Pages 34–36** provide information and practical tools on how to identify and meet your goals.

Extra help is available during this difficult time — no matter where you are in your separation. See **pages 40–44** for the list of *Useful Contacts*.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Separation and emotions 1

- Cycle of grief 1
- Tips on dealing with grief 3
- Painful games parents play 5

Moving forward 10

- What is a workable relationship? 11

Dealing with your ex 16

- Effective communication 16
- Conflict 19
 - Hot spots with your ex 19
 - Power and control struggles 20
 - How fighting hurts the kids 21
 - Resolving conflict 22

Sharing parenting 24

- Parenting after separation 24
- Parenting arrangements 25
 - Planning your children's future 26
 - Tips on how to reach agreement 27
- Parenting time schedule 28
 - Parenting time schedule options 29
 - Example of a parenting time schedule 33

New directions 34

- Change 34
 - Planning for change 34
 - Acting on your goals 36
 - Dealing with set backs 37
- Dealing with friends and family following separation 38

Useful contacts 40

- Community service providers 40
- Government agencies 41
- Self help books 42
- Websites 43
- Parenting arrangements guideline foldout

SEPARATION AND EMOTIONS

Separation is not a single event. It can take place over months or years and is often an emotional roller coaster with many changes and adjustments to a person's life.

Emotions experienced before, during and after separation are those of grief at losing the family unit as we have known it.



DID YOU KNOW?

Researchers estimate that the period of adjustment for families can range anywhere from 1 to 3 years.

A range of emotions can surface in any order, at any time, for different periods. Everyone experiences them differently.

CYCLE OF GRIEF

Shock — feeling numb.

Denial — disbelief and pretending that this isn't happening.

Anger — frustrated outpouring of bottled up emotions.

Bargaining — trying to find a way out; to resolve the situation, or to try and start again.

Depression/Isolation — realising that it's going to happen.

Acceptance — finding a way forward.

Change — looking for real solutions to move on and be focused.



DID YOU KNOW?

Children also experience the grief process when parents separate. They may not know how to say it but might show it through things like being clingy or crying or not being able to focus on school work. Have a look at the 'What About Me?' booklet pages 32-33, available from the Child Support Agency. To order a free copy of the book visit www.csa.gov.au



Circle the feelings you have experienced in the last month.

Depression/ Isolation	Shock	Denial	Anger
empty	disbelief	hesitant	furious
lonely	unsure	indecisive	unforgiving
hopeless	overwhelmed	indifferent	hostile
distressed	confused	rejected	bitter
unhappy	wounded	dismissive	jealous
fearful	insulted	negative	mean

Bargaining	Acceptance	Change
guilty	determined	involved
regretful	calm	focused
sorry	understanding	relaxed
shamed	respectful	opportunistic
weak	strong	empowered
hopeful	motivated	active

Write down how you would like to deal with these feelings.

Why would you like to deal with these?

What would it look like for you if you dealt with these?

TIPS ON DEALING WITH GRIEF

Shock

When people are physically in shock we cover them with a warm blanket. Take care of yourself:

- Take 'time out' just for you even if it's only 10 minutes a day.
- Eat regular meals that include fruit and vegies.
- Read a book, listen to some music.
- Get some good sleep.
- Cry as long and as often as you need — it's a *natural reaction*.
- Talk about your feelings.

Ask for help. Find someone who will listen. (See *Useful Contacts* at the end of this book). Take any assistance that is offered.

Anger — options to deal with anger

Write it out — Work through your anger by keeping a journal or by writing letters BUT don't mail them. It's a way of putting down what you think and feel and standing back and looking at what you have written.

Shout it out — Wind up the windows in your car or put your head in a pillow, and scream. It helps to get rid of the negative energy in your body.

Talk it out — Instead of directing your anger at your ex, talk to a friend or seek help with a professional who specialises in anger management.

Take responsibility for your part of the relationship

break-up — It's rare that only one partner is solely at fault. Recognising what makes you angry can help to find the triggers and old patterns so that you can take steps to stop repeating them.

Think about the important issues — Talking about every little irritation provokes resentment — let go of the small stuff.

Denial

Denial is a natural coping mechanism for things that happen which we don't really want to see.

Be honest with yourself and ask:

- What are the thoughts or situations I have been trying to avoid?
- What have I rejected because it's 'too close to home'?
- Is there some truth in it? If so, what can I plan to do about it?

Face your behaviour, make a plan to improve it and then stay with the plan.

Depression/Isolation

Sometimes when you're depressed it's hard to get any enjoyment out of things. You may have stopped doing things you used to enjoy, which keeps the depression going.

- It may help to get back into a routine but take it slowly. Try to do more of the things you enjoy. Your doctor, counsellor, church leader, elder or friend may be able to help you.
- Find out about local support groups led by trained and experienced professionals.
- Re-establish familiar routines.
- Get some exercise.



Extra help can be found at the end of this book listed under *Useful Contacts*.

For more information about dealing with depression see 'What About Me?' page 23. To order a free copy of the book see the inside front cover of this book or visit www.csa.gov.au

Bargaining

Ask yourself:

- What would the situation look like in 12 months time if I did...?
- What would the benefits be?

Change

Establish a plan for the future and set goals for 6 and 12 months ahead (see page 36, *Acting on your Goals*).

PAINFUL GAMES PARENTS PLAY

Separation is usually a painful experience for everyone involved. The emotions and feelings can lead to putting children in the middle of battles.

If you find yourself being drawn into one of these games refer to the following sections for some suggestions on how to deal with the situation:

- Effective communication pages 16–18.
- Resolving conflict pages 19–23.
- Tips on how to reach agreement page 27.

Common games parents play that can harm children are:

I SPY



This is where one parent tries to get information about the other parent. For example, 'Tell me sweetheart, who was at Mummy's/Daddy's house when you were there?'

Impact on child

Children love both parents and this game asks them to break the trust of a parent or carry the anger of a parent.

TUG OF WAR

Trying to get the child's support which then confirms that the parent is 'right'. For example, 'Listen, the kids don't like sleeping over with you when your new partner is there... isn't that right kids?'

Impact on child

Children feel as if they are being ripped apart and consequently lose respect for both parents and themselves, sometimes unable to show their real feelings.

PASS THE MESSAGE



Telling the children to pass messages to the other parent when it should only be discussed between the parents. For example 'Tell Daddy that he needs to put the child support in the bank account', 'Tell Mummy to pack some more clothes next time you come to stay.'

Impact on child

Being a messenger is a big load for a child. They feel worried that the other parent will become angry with them and then withdraw into their shell.

SETUP

Trying to get in the way of the time the other parent spends with the child. For example, Dad has footy tickets for a weekend game when the children are not in his care and requires the child to ask Mum if he can go. Mum responds with a 'No'.

Impact on child

A child can become unfriendly and argue with the other parent. It can also lead to behaviour that isn't the child's normal character.

PARTY POOPER



The child is criticised for the activities done while with the other parent. For example, 'Is that all you did today? That's not very exciting.'

Impact on child

A child feels let down and bad about the day spent with the other parent. This can lead to difficult behaviour next time.

Children learn from the important people in their lives.

They learn how to treat other people and manage feelings and emotions. Parents need to deal with 'game-playing' and develop positive ways of dealing with the other parent.

WHAT WOULD I DO WITHOUT YOU?

Separated parents might count on their child to support them or fill the emotional gap they're experiencing. For example, 'You are such a great help, especially when I am sad — what would I do without you?'

Impact on child

Children feel responsible and worry when having to take on the role of their parent's friend or helpmate.



OVER MY DEAD BODY

Parents try to keep the children from the other parent, or try to financially bankrupt the other parent through costly legal proceedings to show that they are the better parent. For example, 'Unless you stick to the agreement I will go back to court. Over my dead body will you do...'

Impact on child

Children feel it is their fault and that if they weren't there maybe their parents wouldn't be fighting.

GUIDED MISSILE



Children are used as a weapon to try and change the way the other parent acts, or to try and get something from them. For example, 'You are spending all your time with your new partner — what about the kids?'

Impact on child

Children think that their feelings do not matter when they are used as a pawn.

NAME CALLING

Sometimes parents believe that the children should 'know the truth' about the other parent. For example, 'What would you know about being a responsible parent — you loser!'

Impact on child

Children deserve to feel good about where they come from. By putting down the other parent, the child feels that's the way they are thought of as well.

SPRING CLEAN



Parents remove everything from the home that was connected to the other parent, for example, photos, CDs, clothing, books etc.

Impact on child

Children feel a sense of isolation and loneliness and can retreat within themselves — afraid of the repercussions if they say anything about the other parent.

MONEY GAMES

Parents might let children know how worried they are when bills arrive. For example, 'We have so many bills this month; I wish the child support money was more regular. But don't you worry — we'll survive.'

Impact on child

Children become scared and feel insecure. They may start to unnecessarily worry about ways to bring money into the home.

STARTING OVER



Sometimes separation makes parents feel that they need to start over and part of this is adopting a younger look with clothing or hairstyles, staying out late or not coming home until the following morning.

Impact on child

Children find it embarrassing and confusing when parents act like 'one of the kids'. It's a time when they need care and guidance — not to be guiding.

PHONE TAPPING

Parents listen to the telephone conversations between the child and other parent; regularly interrupting by making comments and asking questions.

Impact on child

Child's sense of trust, privacy and safety with the eavesdropping parent is jeopardised. The child becomes angry, agitated and distracted which impacts on their willingness to openly communicate with them.

BLAME GAME***'I'm not saying it's your fault. I'm just blaming you!'***

'I have nothing, your mother has everything!' or 'I miss you so much when you are with your father. I hate being alone.' A parent may blame the other parent to relieve their anger and frustration, protect themselves from additional loss or because they want the child's affection and believe this can only be done by alienating the child from the other parent.

Impact on child

Children feel guilty and manipulated that they are being forced to take sides and reject the other parent. They become fearful and angry that if they don't take sides that they will lose the love and affection of the parent. This could hurt your relationship with your child as well as the other parent.

PARENTS WITH PRESSIES

Some parents give extravagant gifts and outings to their kids to try and compensate for their absence. Often the other parent feels inadequate because they cannot afford to do the same and animosity builds between the parents.

Impact on child

Children may come to expect these gifts and outings on a regular basis and develop a distorted view of what relationships are about. When the gifts stop the child may resent the parent for not giving them 'their due', or think they don't love them any more.

MOVING FORWARD

'Staying angry with your ex allows them to live rent-free in your head.'

Things can and do get better with the other parent — especially if you think of making it a working relationship. You may no longer be partners but you are parents forever.

If things are really bad, it might help not to see the other parent for a while — communicate by phone, letter or email instead.

'Blame and anger aren't very useful.'

'Talk to someone — don't bottle it up.'

'Focus on what's best for the kids.'

'Sometimes things go backwards for a while.'

'Counselling can help.'

'I had to rethink my role — PARENT NOT partner.'

'Give it time — things will improve.'

'Try to come to an arrangement with the other parent.'

'Look after yourself.'

'You don't have to win every fight.'

'Have goals and make plans for the future.'

WHAT IS A WORKABLE RELATIONSHIP?

'It's not about getting back together.'

A workable relationship is one which involves both parents negotiating the day-to-day parenting responsibilities. It takes effort.

Many people put up with difficult relationships in business situations or partnerships e.g. shopkeepers, accountants, doctors, lawyers, community services, restaurateurs. They do this in order to maintain a workable relationship and to achieve their goals.



ACTIVITY

Ask yourself:

What are your goals regarding your relationship with your ex?

1. *e.g. To deal with each other without it turning into a screaming match*

2.

3.

What are your goals for your children?

1. *e.g. To make sure the kids realise that they were not the cause of separation*

2.

3.

What are your ex's goals for your children?

1. *e.g. To maintain their routines*

2.

3.

How can you compromise with your ex to achieve the best outcomes for your children?

1. *e.g. Suggest we go to speak with a counsellor to help us reach an agreement*

2.

3.

A workable relationship has four key elements:

Shared respect	To not publicly judge the other parent.
Consideration	To be sensitive to the feelings of the other parent. Put yourself in their shoes.
Courtesy	Being polite shows consideration for the other person.
Clear communication	To swap ideas, listen, and try to understand where the other parent is coming from.

Although your relationship as partner has ended, your role as Mum or Dad will continue for a lifetime. Children do well when they are able to have a nurturing, supportive relationship with BOTH parents.



Children grow, so plan on them wanting BOTH of you to be involved in holidays, weddings and other special occasions.

Parenting is forever!



Parents are still responsible for their children whether they live with them or not.

TIPS...TIPS...TIPS...TIPS...TIPS...TIPS...

- Rethink your role — PARENT not Partner.
- Work through your anger (see *pages 1–4*).
- Create limits with your ex:
 - Be clear about arrangements and agreements. Check your understanding with questions.
 - Stick to talking about the kids and their issues.
 - Don't get stuck talking or arguing about the past.
- Separate children's needs from personal concerns — list them.

Ask yourself:

Is this really a problem?

How will it affect the kids?

Would the kid's needs be met if my concern was not acted on?

- Try not to compete with the other parent. Let them talk without interruption.
- Face conflict head on, resolve it on the spot (see *Resolving Conflict* on page 22). Arrange a time and place to talk without the children.
- Give changes a chance to take hold! Look to the longer term. Suggest a time for review.
- Accept others for who they are rather than how you would like them to be. Respect the other parent's privacy.



Although progress can be made through these feelings and emotions, setbacks are NORMAL.

DEALING WITH YOUR EX

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Children benefit when parents treat each other with respect and can cooperate. This can be a tough thing to do as a relationship breaks down.



Separate your former roles as partners from your ongoing role as parents.

Understanding your personal style of communicating will go a long way to help you make things more comfortable.

Poor communication makes things difficult and feeds conflict, creating power struggles.

Roadblocks to communicating effectively

- One or both parents have negative or hostile reactions to each other.
Suggestion — try saying it in an email or a letter (always keep a copy for reference when discussing issues later).
- Interference or distractions from the outside.
Suggestion — use a neutral location to meet, for example, a cafe; suggest both parents turn off their mobile phones.
- Always being in a hurry does not allow effective communication to occur.
Suggestion — Arrange in advance a time to speak — not at changeover time.
- Parents need to be clear about what they are saying.
Suggestion — Prepare, write down the issues you wish to cover and tick each off as you go through them.
- Parents have different words to express themselves.
Suggestion — Keep it simple. Reconfirm your understanding of the conversation with the other parent ‘Do I understand this correctly...?’



CAUTION!! Where high conflict, abuse or violence is involved, communication with your ex may not be possible.

There are three recognised styles of communication.

	Passive	Aggressive	Assertive
<i>Description</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - You put the rights of others before your own, minimising your own self worth. - Often feel that you have no control over a situation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - You stand up for your rights but you violate the rights of others. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - You stand up for your rights while maintaining respect for the rights of others. - State limits and expectations and check on others' feelings.
<i>Language used</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 'This is probably wrong but...' - 'You have more experience than I do...' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 'You must...' - 'Don't ask why — just do it...' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 'I choose to...' - 'What alternatives do we have?'
<i>Non-verbal styles (behaviours)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sighs a lot. - Looks down or away. - Hunched posture. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Moves into people's space — overpowers. - Points, shakes finger. - Frowns, glares, stares. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Open, natural gestures. - Direct eye contact. - Relaxed and confident posture.
<i>Potential consequences or effects</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lowered self esteem. - Builds dependency relationships. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Disrespect from others. - Feared by others. - Alienates others. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Higher self esteem. - Respect for and from others. - Feels motivated and understood.
<i>Problem-solving style</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Avoids, ignores, leaves, postpones. - Agrees externally while disagrees internally. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Must win arguments, threatens, attacks. - Operates from a win/lose position. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Negotiates, bargains, compromises. - Deals with problems at the time they happen. - Doesn't let negative feelings build up.

Can you identify which style you tend to use when dealing with your ex?

Suggestions

You may feel uncomfortable using these phrases at first, but with regular practice it will become easier. Practice makes perfect.

Here are some examples of assertiveness:

1. Stating your preference or opinion

'My preference is _____.'

'What I'd like is _____.'

2. Expressing your feelings

'I feel angry/hurt when _____.'

'I am concerned about _____.'

3. Making requests

'This arrangement is not what I hoped it would be. I would like to change it.'

'This is what I really want.'

4. Disagreeing with someone

'I disagree with you when you say _____ because _____.'

5. Confronting

'I' statements:

'I feel _____ when you _____ because _____.'

'I want you in future to _____.'



ACTIVITY

What is the most current issue with your ex that you're having difficulty with?

Write down your response to the situation.

***The Assertive Style is generally the best style to use.
Very few people are all one style.***

CONFLICT

After separation you need to be able to discuss issues that affect the children without being stuck in old battles.

What's important is how you handle your differences — not that they exist.

Sorting out issues is part of everyday life.

There is almost no end to what sparks conflict during separation:

- Differences of opinion.
- Complaints about how agreements/arrangements are carried out.
- Criticism about behaviour/attitude.
- Doing the opposite to what was asked.

Hot spots with your ex

He rolls his eyes every time I speak!

It's the look she gives me!

When she speaks to me she always has her hands on her hips!

He looks everywhere else but at me when I am speaking to him!

Button pressing is where you feel you are being deliberately aggravated by your ex.

This might include:

1. Reading what your ex has said about you in documents that you believe not to be true.
2. Purchasing things for the children without discussing it with you first.
3. Returning children without their clothes or other items they left with.
4. Deliberately bringing up past arguments or differences of opinion.

The things your ex did when you were together often continue to annoy you after separation. Sometimes what you think is deliberate button-pressing to get you annoyed is simply the way your ex is.



DID YOU KNOW?

In 60% of instances, it is not what is said that matters but how it is said.



ACTIVITY

Recognise the trap before you take the bait; write a list of situations that you find yourself reacting to.

Write what it is you do to push their buttons.

Power and control struggles

When separated parents deal with power and control issues it is important to understand the way it appears to the children.

Typical power and control struggles are:

1. Coercion and threats — using physical violence or verbal threats.
2. Intimidation — put downs, breaking things or acting aggressively.
3. Economic abuse — withholding financial payments.
4. Emotional abuse — name put downs, criticising and making the other parent feel guilty.
5. Children — denying involvement, threatening to take the children away, alienating the other parent.



Extra help can be found at the end of this book listed under *Useful Contacts*.



Getting a third person to help deal with conflict can take the heat and emotion out of the argument to move forward. Mediation services are provided by local community service providers and some government agencies. For a list of your local Community Service Providers visit www.csa.gov.au or call CSA on 131 272

How fighting hurts the kids

Don't let your children become casualties of a war

I get scared when Mummy says she and Daddy are going to court — will they come back?

Jared, aged 7

I just wish Mum and Dad understood how scary it is when they argue and fight.

Laura, aged 13

When children hear parents' heated debates, bad mouthing and insults, it hurts them.

Children see themselves as being half of their Mum and half of their Dad. When they hear bad things about one parent, they tend to feel that it is something bad about them as well.



Children should not have to go through financial or emotional hardship because of a decision made by their parents.

Every time Dad calls, Mum butts in saying 'Tell your father blah blah blah.' It really cuts me — it's my time, not hers.

Imogen, 15 years

I just want to tell them to shut up when they argue over ridiculous things — they don't give a damn about anyone else. It really does my head in.

Isaac, 17

Resolving conflict



Any conflict that comes up should be sorted out quickly — don't let it go on and on until someone reaches boiling point.

Steps involved in dealing with issues

1. **Let go of the old stuff** — how you used to do things. Avoid using the words **never**, **ever** or **always** and **you**. E.g. 'You always make promises you can't keep.'
2. **Think about your own actions and reactions.** Work on things you can control. If you become upset, stop — and continue when you have calmed down. Speak calmly, breathe slowly.
3. **Pay attention to your physical and emotional health.** Look after yourself. Role-play — practice with a friend or counsellor what you want to say and how to respond in difficult situations.
4. **Let your children know you both love them** and will always be their Mum and Dad, no matter what happens.
5. **Agree on short-term arrangements** then look at longer-term solutions.
6. **Focus on needs and interests**, for example, 'The kids need to see both of us regularly' rather than taking a position which invites arguments, for example, 'I want the kids every other week.'



There are NO quick fixes or miracles. You can do all the right things and still not have immediate results.

When parents can work through their conflict, it helps children learn about how to handle disagreements. It gives them confidence in their parents' ability to take care of them and move forward.



ACTIVITY

Try some of the following activities for three months with your ex partner and keep using what works:

- Be as calm as possible.
- Remember when one parent wins and one loses — both lose and so do the kids.
- Avoid statements like ‘Prove it.’
- Take time to identify the actual issue you want to resolve.
- Write down the best and worst thing that can happen.
- Ask for what you want — you might get it.
- Talk straight. When you say YES mean yes and NO when you mean no.
- Try to negotiate a solution you both can live with.

For more tips on dealing with conflict see ‘What About Me’ pp 30–31. To order a free copy visit www.csa.gov.au

TIPS

TIP

Pick the right time and place to work it through. More often than not, separated parents fight late at night when they’re tired and don’t have the mental and emotional capacity to deal with the problem.

TIP

Don’t tell your ex that they are wrong. If you do, you can be assured that your ‘wrong’ ex partner will fight even harder to prove that they are right.

TIP

Admit when you’re wrong, it’s difficult but your ex should have more respect for you for doing that than for defending an incorrect decision.

TIP

Make sure your body language matches your words:

- Body language communicates **60%** of the message we send to others.
- Tone of voice communicates **30%** of the message we send to others.
- The actual words that come out of our mouths communicate **10%** of our message.

SHARING PARENTING

PARENTING AFTER SEPARATION

Children look to their parents for signs that the family can and will get through this difficult period.

You are no longer partners but are still parents forever. This means trying to find a way to work through the issues of separation and parenting.

See pages 11-14 for more information on workable relationships.

I'd like to see my kids more but they live two hours away. I get to see them every second weekend and speak to them every Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday. I meet my ex at a half way point for changeovers. We split the school holidays and if there is something really important going on for the kids, I'm there. My ex and I have set a regular time each week to discuss the kids. It's not perfect but it's working for the kids at the moment.

Nathan, separated 10 months

My ex and I have a folder that we send with the kids at changeovers. It has school notes, newsletters, reports and homework sheets etc. If money has to be paid for incidentals then it is placed in an envelope so the kids don't see. Bags are dropped off at the other parent's house so the kids don't feel awkward going to school with them. This has worked now for 2 years with no major problems.

Damien, separated 3 years

Initially after we separated and I spoke to my ex on the phone, it ended up in a screaming match. I decided to go to counselling to learn how to deal with it. I backed right off, didn't react to the sarcastic comments and was more flexible about arrangements for seeing the kids. It took a while but my ex and I can now have a conversation without it ending in a phone hang up.

Anna-Marie, separated 18 months



ACTIVITY

Sit down with your children, and ask them what they want from Mum and Dad. Make a list and stick it near the telephone as a constant reminder.

PARENTING ARRANGEMENTS

One of the ways to work through the issues of parenting is to have some parenting arrangements in place (see the *Parenting arrangement guidelines* on the foldout at the back of the book).

Parenting arrangements outline the responsibilities of both parents in raising their children. The focus should be on what is best for the children.

Typically, parenting arrangements cover important areas such as:

- Recreation and holiday arrangements.
- Residential and child care arrangements.
- Financial arrangements e.g. who pays for what.
- Decision making guidelines about the children.
- Special occasion arrangements e.g. birthdays, Christmas.
- Time spent with each parent and the wider family — called a *Parenting Time Schedule* (refer to page 28 for more information).

Parenting arrangements should ideally be changed regularly to meet the needs of your growing children and the needs of both parents.

Initially, after separation both parents may want to review the arrangements quarterly, or six-monthly. When relationships and routines become more stable over time, it might be appropriate to only review the document yearly.



When high levels of conflict are not involved, flexibility is the key to successful shared parenting arrangements.

Planning your children's future

When creating your parenting arrangements make sure the age, needs and personality of each child are thought about.

Children need:

- stability and routine — in relationships with family and friends, in living environment, school, clubs and activities.
- clear and honest explanations about what is happening and why, appropriate to their age.
- consideration — their views need to be taken into account before any final decisions are made.
- communication — to know how to keep in touch with people they care about, e.g. by letters, phone, email video/audio tapes.

What parents say

Arrangements about the kids were disorganised and this led to so many arguments. The counsellor suggested we draw up a Parenting Plan — so we did. It's much easier now and there's less fighting — we both know what to expect — so do the kids.

Liz, separated 16 months

It looked like it was going to get ugly there for a while with the lawyers potentially making a packet.

I was told by a mate that he and his ex had followed a thing called a Parenting Plan. He ran me through what they'd done and then I suggested to my ex that maybe we give it a go. It's been working ever since.

Josh, separated 7 years.

Since we set up our Parenting Plan there aren't the hiccups there used to be. It's helped us to be more focused on the kids rather than on the issues we have with each other.

Tom, separated 2 years

 Your decisions about how much time the children will spend in the care of each parent may affect:

- how much child support a parent is responsible for
- whether a parent can claim a tax dependency deduction
- parenting rebates and other agency payments e.g. sole parent allowance.



For more tips on keeping in touch with your kids, see *Me and My Kids*. To order a copy visit www.csa.gov.au

Tips on how to reach agreement

Focus first on the areas of agreement and then move to discussions about things you don't agree on.

First questions to ask are:

- Is this a child related problem or a parent issue? If not a child's, whose problem or issue is it?
- What impact (if any) does the problem/issue have on your children?

When you think the other parent is taking everything you say the wrong way. Try asking:

- 'Tell me what you think.'
- 'I hear you saying... Is that correct?'
- 'What do you think would be best for our children?'

When you feel yourself closing down:

- Remind yourself — you are doing this for your children. You and the other parent love them and they need both of you.



If you find yourselves getting stuck GET HELP!

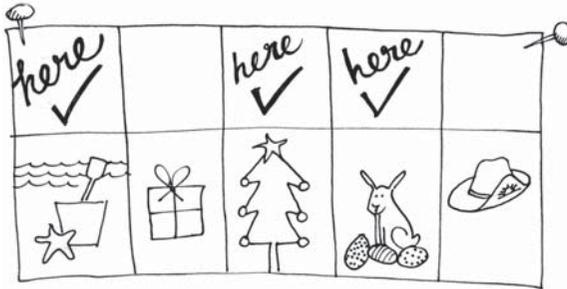
- Mediation — see other useful contacts in the back of this book.
- Counsellors, GP, Church leader, Family Court.
- Refer to *Dealing with your ex* on page 16.
- Refer to *What About Me?* booklet — One step at a time pages 30–31. To order a copy visit www.csa.gov.au
- Family Relationship Centres

PARENTING TIME SCHEDULE

Parenting time schedules form part of parenting arrangements.

The contact schedule normally outlines the:

- regular ongoing contact arrangements for the non-resident parent and child e.g. weekly, fortnightly, monthly
- arrangements for special occasions e.g. Christmas, birthdays, etc.



Because people's lives and children's development needs continually change, all agreements should be flexible.



DID YOU KNOW?

Budgeting for time together, if you live far apart, may be a reason to review your child support assessment. Call CSA on 131 272.

PARENTING TIME SCHEDULE OPTIONS

0–12 Months — Development of trust

It is important for an infant to feel safe; to have consistent routines and their needs met promptly.



TIPS:

- Contact away from the primary caregiver should be short but frequent.
- Contact needs to be adjusted to the child's eating and sleeping cycles.
- Both parents should be aware of the infant's usual routine.

EXAMPLE: 1–3 hours two to three times a week.

12–24 Months — Developing language and memory skills

Emotional attachments to one or two caregivers start to form and so a change in surroundings can be unsettling.



TIPS:

- Contact with both parents should be no longer than three days apart.
- To ease the initial anxiety at changeover ensure familiar possessions are sent with the child — cuddly toys etc.
- The duration of contact with non-resident parents should increase and progress to overnight stays over time.

EXAMPLE: One daytime period of up to 8 hours with up to two non-consecutive overnights each week.

24–36 Months — Establishing bonds with many caregivers

Initially a toddler may resist separation from the primary caregiver and start to show their frustration with tantrums.



TIPS:

- Make changeovers as quick and painless as possible to minimise separation anxiety.
- Present a united front – kids at this age will start to test the boundaries and it's easier on everyone if they are the same at both houses.

EXAMPLE: Two non-consecutive nights per week with one weekend per month.

3–5 Years — Developing social skills

Children start to imitate adult behaviours and develop a basic understanding of language, time and relationships. They do not, however, understand the concept of separation or divorce.



TIPS:

- Foster good feelings about future time to be spent with the other parent. 'Tomorrow Mummy/Daddy is taking you to the park and then you are staying at her/his house!'
- Keep conflict away from your kids.
- Talk to them about their feelings regarding the separation e.g. 'Are you feeling sad?'

EXAMPLE: Two to three consecutive nights each week.

6–12 Years (Primary School) — Developing relationships

Self esteem, confidence, security and peer pressure become issues.

Children begin to feel concerned about spending an equal amount of time with each parent so it is important they have individual time with each.



TIPS:

- Inviting friends over to play is an important part of growing up.
- Younger children still need frequent contact.
- As a child matures, longer periods with fewer changeovers may be preferable.

EXAMPLE: Alternate weekends with two consecutive overnight stays in the off week.

13–17 Years (Adolescents) — Increasing independence

Adolescents begin the process of separating from their parents, resist rigid contact arrangements and start to make independent decisions.

TIPS:

- Friends and social activities become first priorities.
- Flexibility is the key!
- Don't be disappointed if your kids don't want to spend time with either parent at this age. This might not be about the divorce but more about the lifestyles of teenagers!

EXAMPLE: Every alternate weekend with some flexible contact in between.

There are many ways to share parenting. Don't be limited by the examples above. As a parent you know what is best for your child.

Ideally both parents should experience all aspects of parenting e.g. when child is happy, sad, sick, at school, with friends, at mealtimes, at bed times, in the morning etc. Don't forget both extended families should be involved with the child also.

Here are some suggestions that have worked for other parents:

- Shared parenting time for very young children — e.g. both parents meet and play with child in a park or in one parent's home.
- Non-resident parent drives children to various activities e.g. picks them up for school, takes them to sport etc.
- Grandparents become involved in kids school reading program.
- A week in each household.
- Non-resident parent looks after child when child is sick.
- Parent with more flexible working hours provides after school care for children.

'At first I didn't want Glen to have any contact with the kids at all. Then I realised how the kids, Glen and even I would benefit if he did. Now he picks them up from school every day as he finishes work early. They love spending time with him and he helps them with their homework. I pick them up at 5.30 and we don't have to pay for after school care!'

Sarah, separated 2 years

Shared parenting is not about splitting the time with each parent 50/50 — but is about both parents being involved in the decision-making and the care of the children.

EXAMPLE OF A PARENTING TIME SCHEDULE*

You may want to show your parenting time arrangements with pictures to give you a snapshot view of your week/month. Depending on your arrangements, you can choose to add as many or as few pictures as you like.

Month	SUN	MON	TUES	WED	THUR	FRI	SAT
Week 1							
Week 2							
Week 3							
Week 4							

Key



Parental Sport Duty/
Coaching



Afternoon period 1–5.30 pm



After school pick up



Contact period that has a duration
of up to 4 hours and includes a meal



Activity time with
non-residential parent
up to 2 hours



Child sleeping over with
non-residential parent



Morning period
8–12.30 pm



Hobbies/Tutoring/Outside school
activities that the parent is
responsible for the transportation



For more tips on staying in touch and other activities to do with your kids, see *Me and My Kids*. To order a copy, see the inside front cover of this book or visit www.csa.gov.au

* Bruce Smyth (2004) 'Parent-child contact schedules after divorce': Family Matters No. 69 pp 32–43

NEW DIRECTIONS

**'If you take charge of the little things,
the big ones will soon fall into place.'**

Separation can leave you feeling confused and without purpose or direction. It might help to look at where you are now. Lay out a 'game plan' for the kind of life you want, and start moving in a positive direction to achieve your goals.

CHANGE

Change can be used as a way to review how you live and relate to others; a chance to improve relationships and your quality of life.

After separation we are no longer under the same influences that directed how we lived our life. It is a new world where we can explore and decide what we want and who we are.

Planning for change

Deciding to make a change means that you have set a new goal to achieve. With all goals you need to figure out the:

- steps you will take once you're ready for action (start small)
- hurdles you may come across
- tools and budget you will need to make this change
- kind of support you need to make this change.

Remember — at this stage you are planning only — not doing. Your focus should be on:

- what you have
- what you need
- what things will help you to reach your goal.



DID YOU KNOW?

Changing something requires you to practice it for at least 30 days before it becomes a habit.

Fail to plan and you plan to fail.



ACTIVITY

What do I want to work on?

<input type="checkbox"/> Friendships	<input type="checkbox"/> Physical health
<input type="checkbox"/> Relationships with family members	<input type="checkbox"/> Hobbies/leisure time
<input type="checkbox"/> Job advancement	<input type="checkbox"/> Involvement in my neighbourhood/community
<input type="checkbox"/> Housing	<input type="checkbox"/> More involvement in children's activities
<input type="checkbox"/> Creative/musical interest	<input type="checkbox"/> Self care — emotional wellbeing
<input type="checkbox"/> Education	<input type="checkbox"/> Volunteering

It is likely that the most important change you have recorded fits into one of the major life areas above.

If you ticked more than one — set a time for each and take it one step at a time.



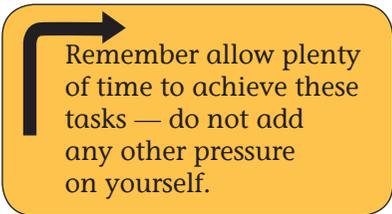
Acting on your goals

Having decided on the steps you will take it's time to set a structure so that they can be achieved. You do not need to do all these things at once — it may take several months or years depending on the type of goal.

For example

Goal: To develop a social network — broaden my circle of friends.

Task	Tools	Date to be completed
1. Create list of social groups within your area	Yellow Pages Internet Community radio Local community centres	30 June
2. Contact each group and ask about: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• types of social activities• costs• age groups• guidelines about kids being included	List — Sheet of A4 divided up to record the details	26 July
3. From the list created: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• tick the things in each that you feel comfortable with• check your availability — make sure there is nothing else booked in	Calendar	14 August
4. Recontact the social group(s) whose activities you would like to attend and register for the next function	Telephone	1 September



Remember allow plenty of time to achieve these tasks — do not add any other pressure on yourself.

Dealing with set backs

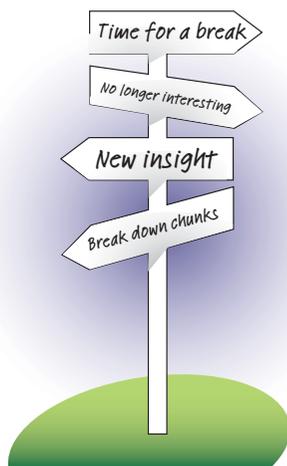
It is rare that everything goes according to plan; mistakes are made and it can feel all too hard. The best thing to do is to make a plan for how you will cope when you don't feel good about yourself or how things are going.

- Write down a couple of people you can talk to that will encourage you to keep going.
- Write down one thing that you will do when you feel like giving up on your goal.

If it is not working out WHAT THEN?

If after doing the above, and things aren't going right, there could be several reasons:

- Your original goal may no longer hold any interest for you — it's not until you start that you will find this out.
- You have learned something new about yourself along the way and this is something that you are not cut out for. This is NOT a failure.
- You could need a break from working on your goal. Knowing when to put this work aside is as important as pushing yourself to succeed. Set a future date to review and start working on your goal again.
- Your goal was too big to start with. Break it down into smaller more manageable chunks.



DEALING WITH FRIENDS AND FAMILY FOLLOWING SEPARATION

With so many changes in your life many of your old friends might seem changed too. We see them differently. They see us differently. Many of our old friends will not know how to look at us.

It's a sad fact but you are likely to lose some friends you are not expecting to lose, especially married ones. They may not understand the emotions you are going through and feel inadequate or your separation is a little too close to home.

Comments made by separated parents



'It was awkward for a lot of people, but my friends acted like they were getting divorced instead of me. But now I know how to handle it when it happens to somebody else.'

'I looked around and everybody was gone, everybody got kinda weird when I'd run into 'em at school, the shops or at functions. Why do my friends react this way?'

'Divorce really lets you know who your friends are.'

What can I do to maintain my friendships following separation?

1. As soon as you can, sit down and prepare the details that you want others to know, like:
 - Is it okay to ask the ex partner/spouse to parties?
 - Is it okay to invite your ex's new partner to social events?
2. Most friends and family want to help but are unaware of what it is you need. Ask for what you want and don't wait for them to call as they may feel that they are intruding.
3. Leave nothing to chance in their understanding of your expectations.
 - Do you want them to stay neutral and remain in contact with both of you?
 - Do you want a particular friend to be someone you can confide in?
 - Are you comfortable being invited to the same function as your ex?
4. Give friends permission to tell you when they need a break. Try to find a support group as an alternative to relying on your friends.

If you want to have a friend — be one.



USEFUL CONTACTS

DISCLAIMER

This list of resources is provided for your information and convenience only. The Child Support Agency does not accept responsibility for, endorse, monitor or control external resources and is not responsible for their content, services or your access or use of them.

Please note: Extra charges apply to calls made from mobile and public phones

State, territory and local governments and community organisations also fund financial and other counselling, support and information services in Australia. Check the phone book for services in your area. For website links to state governments and local councils visit www.gov.au.

USEFUL PHONE NUMBERS

Centacare	1300 138 070
Family Services Australia	1300 365 859
Kids Helpline	1800 551 800
Lifeline	131 114
Mensline Australia	1300 789 978
Relationships Australia	1300 364 277
Telephone Interpreting Service	131 450

Need a service in your area?

The Community Service Directory is a list of community service providers located across Australia. Details of services in your area can be accessed by calling 131 272 or visit the CSA website www.csa.gov.au.

GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

Centrelink

Phone 136 150
www.centrelink.gov.au
Information on all government benefits

Child Support Agency

Phone 131 272
Teletypewriter (TTY) 1800 631 187
www.csa.gov.au
Includes calculators, budgeting guides, and contact information for community services in your local area

Department of Family, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs

Phone 1300 653 227
www.facsia.gov.au
Includes parenting website resources

Department of Human Services

Phone 1300 554 479
www.humanservices.gov.au

Family Assistance Office

Phone 136 150
www.familyassist.gov.au

Family Court of Australia

Phone 1300 352 000
www.familylawcourts.gov.au
Information to assist in the resolution of family disputes

Family Relationship Advice Line

Phone 1800 050 321
www.familyrelationships.gov.au
Assists people from families affected by relationship or separation issues.

Federal Magistrates Court of Australia

Phone 1300 352 000
www.familylawcourts.gov.au

Legal Aid Offices

www.nla.aust.net.au

Medicare

Phone 132 011
www.medicareaustralia.gov.au

Regional Law Hotline

Phone 1800 050 400
Access to government legal information and services, including legal aid and mediation

CSAonline

CSAonline is a secure Internet service which allows all CSA customers access 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to:

- receive various letters and statements online
- update personal details, and
- advise CSA of changes affecting child support payments

It's easy to register. Go to www.csa.gov.au and follow the links.

SELF HELP BOOKS

There are many books and pamphlets available that can help you with parenting and separation.

Your local library, community centre or bookshops are good places to start.

Children and Separation: a guide for parents and ***Questions and Answers About Separation for Children***, available from your Family Court Registry.

What About Children? available from Relationships Australia.

Mom's House Dad's House: A Complete Guide for Parents who are Separated, Divorced or Remarried, Ricci, I. Simon & Schuster, New York.

The Truth about Children and Divorce: Dealing with the Emotions so You and Your Children can Thrive, Emery, Dr R.

Men and Separation — Choices in Tough Times, available through Mensline Australia and Relationships Australia.



Check out the range of other self-help books, listed on the inside front cover of this book.

WEBSITES

PARENTING

The Raising Children Network

Online guide to raising children aged 0-8 including information on behaviour, nutrition, safety, health and daily care.
www.raisingchildren.net.au

Community.gov.au

Provides access to online services and information for community organisations, communities and individuals.
www.community.gov.au

Families.gov.au

Search for families-related online government information and services.
www.families.gov.au

Parent LINK, ACT

Links to parent guides, tips and emergency fact sheets.
www.parentlink.act.gov.au

NSW Department of Community Services

Information on child protection and children's services as well as tips and advice on parenting.
www.community.nsw.gov.au

Northern Territory Families Website

Tips about parenting and living in families.
www.families.nt.gov.au/asp/index.asp

Department of Communities, Queensland

Parent tip sheets, information for families.
www.communities.qld.gov.au

Parenting SA

Access to Parent Easy Guides – information on a wide range of parenting topics from birth through to adolescence.
www.parenting.sa.gov.au

Department of Human Services, Victoria

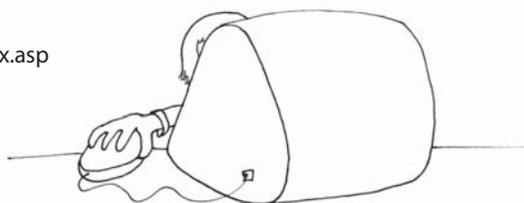
Information about families and children of all ages. Includes link to Better Health Channel (health information).
www.dhs.vic.gov.au

Community Resources Online, WA

Provides parenting tips and information and details of services for parents.
www.community.wa.gov.au

Department of Health and Human Services, Tasmania

A gateway to health and human services in Tasmania
www.dhhs.tas.gov.au



ESPECIALLY FOR CHILDREN

CSA recommends parents supervise their children's online activities.

Kids Health

This US site has separate areas for kids, teens and parents – each with its own design, content and tone. It provides doctor-approved information on topics such as health, growth, development, emotional well-being, behaviour, parenting, dealing with divorce and stepfamilies.

www.kidshealth.org.

It's not your fault

Information and advice to kids of all ages whose parents are separating. The site has been developed by a UK charitable organisation.

www.itsnotyourfault.org

RELATIONSHIPS

Relate

Information on relationships, family, love and life.

www.relate.gov.au

FINANCIAL

Commonwealth Financial Counselling Program

Directory of CFCP funded financial counselling services listed by state. www.facsia.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/family/cfcp-cfcp_directory.htm

CHILD SAFETY

Kidsafe

The child accident prevention foundation.

www.kidsafe.com.au

NAPCAN

Provides information about child abuse and neglect, and promotes child-friendly communities.

www.napcan.org.au

PARENTING ARRANGEMENTS GUIDELINE

Use the following as a guide. Photocopy if you have more than two children. Keep a copy for reference.

A parenting arrangement is not enforceable. If you wish to have it made enforceable, an application to the Family Court for Consent Orders should be made.

	Name	Residential address	Date of birth
Child 1			
Child 2			

Communication between parents will be: (tick all that apply)

Type	Parent to initiate contact	Period (daily, weekly, monthly etc)	Date, time
<input type="checkbox"/> in person <input type="checkbox"/> by telephone <input type="checkbox"/> by letter <input type="checkbox"/> by email <input type="checkbox"/> other			

Non-resident parent-child communication: (tick all that apply)

Type	Weekly (day and time)	Daily (day and time)	Monthly (day and time)
<input type="checkbox"/> in person <input type="checkbox"/> by telephone <input type="checkbox"/> by letter <input type="checkbox"/> by email <input type="checkbox"/> other			

Records (tick)

Both parents will have full access to school, day care, medical and other records of our children	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
---	------------------------------	-----------------------------

Decision-making and responsibilities	Details	Person responsible (Mum/Dad)
Education (which school will the children attend K-YR12; entry into special classes)		
Medical (medical procedures needed, medications to be taken, emotional health decisions)		
Dental (procedures needed including orthodontics)		
Selection of health care providers (GP, Specialists, Physiotherapists, Naturopath/ Homeopath, Counsellor, Psychologist)		
Selection of Child Care Providers		
When with mother		
When with father		
Before and after school		
School holiday programs		
Extra curricular activities (what the children will be participating in when these activities involve each person's parenting times)		
Religious upbringing (what faith the children will practice on a regular basis, what special religious ceremonies or occasions will they be involved in)		
Extended family and friends (who children will have contact with e.g. grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins)		

Special occasion parenting time schedule

Special days/ public holidays	Even years		Parenting time from/to	Pick up/drop off locations
	years	Odd years		
Mother's day				
Father's day				
Mother's birthday				
Father's birthday				
Child's birthday				
School holiday term 1				
School holiday term 2				
School holiday term 3				
School holiday term 4				
New year's eve				
New year's day				
Good Friday				
Easter Saturday				
Easter Sunday				
Easter Monday				
Anzac Day				
Queen's Birthday				
Christmas Eve				
Christmas Day				
Boxing Day				

Note: When taking holidays with the children, let the other parent know where, when and how contact can be made e.g. mobile phone (if out of range provide a contact alternative)

Weekday and /or weekend parenting time schedule

Weekdays	Weekdays		From (pick up date/ time)	To (return date/time)	Weekend		Pick up/ drop off location
	Mum	Dad			Mum	Dad	
Week 1	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Week 2	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Week 3	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Week 4	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

Costs

Kids' expenses	Responsibility for \$ amount/ percentage	
	Mum	Dad
Before and after school care		
Child care (before and after school; day care, etc)		
Children's pocket money		
Extra curricular activities and equipment (e.g. music/dance/martial arts/horse riding/soccer/football)		
Health and dental insurance		
Holiday programs		
Holiday travel (circle): air/rail/bus		
School equipment		
School fees		
School uniforms		
Sporting clubs		
Tutoring		
Claiming of deductions/rebates (specify)		
Child mobile phone and ongoing call costs		

Future moves

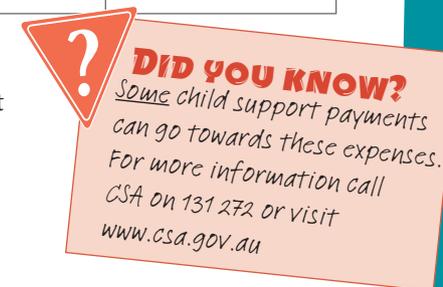
Both parents agree that the acceptable distance that either may move from the other parent without notification is _____ km (e.g. 60 kilometres).

Household rules

Both parents agree that the following rules apply to children in both households:

- No drinking
- No smoking
- Helmets to be worn when bike riding/skating
- School night bedtime is at _____ pm
- (add your own) _____

Agreed review date: ____ / ____ / ____



If you're starting to go through separation it will be really helpful... it works as a checklist.

Julie, separated 1 year

The tips are great — they're like mottos on calendars.

Melissa separated 3½ years

It shows you the common problems that impact on your child and the seriousness of their effect.

Guy, separated 6 months

The games section is fantastic — so on the ball.

Alex, separated 2 years

If you use the Parenting Arrangements Guideline in the book the right way you might understand how you can celebrate an occasion, like a birthday or Christmas, rather than make it into a kind of purgatory.

Matthew, separated 18 months

It focuses upon what's best for the kids.

Lisa, separated 15 months

Sometimes you get into bad habits — you don't necessarily do it to get back at people — that's why reading this really helps.

Madeline, separated 9 months