

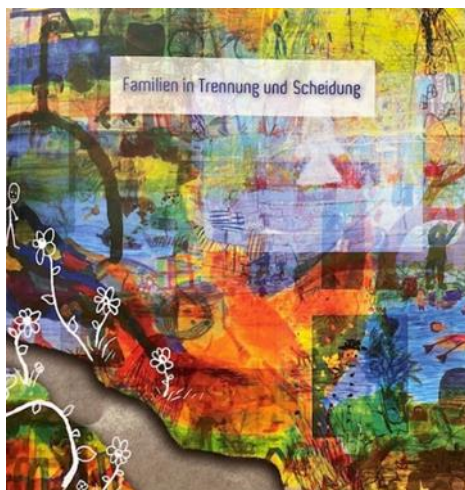
Separation – useful Information

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1. Introduction

The following is a compilation of texts aimed primarily at parents who are on the road to separation or have already separated.

The main focus will be on the effects of separation on the children. Our focus is on guiding parents towards a constructive path for them to get their children through this challenging family phase as safely as possible. The following texts are originally based on the contents of the booklet 'Families in Separation and Divorce' (Published: 2002 by the Ministry for Family and Integration and AG-Qm-Psy) and are available in different languages (DE, FR, ENG).



The initiative was taken by two former employees of the Familljen-Center:

Joana Gross and Marc Bressler, both psychologists, have made it possible for parents to find lots of written information on our website in these turbulent times.

All texts were revised in 2023-2025 at the Familljen Centre and adapted to the current legal situation.

8 employees of the separation/divorce focus group met for months to exchange ideas and rework the content over and over again.

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2. Pre-separation phase

The decision to separate has been made, now what?

The decision to separate often involves a great deal of strain and stress for both partners. On the following pages, we would like to give you tips and advice on how you can accompany and support your children through this critical phase as gently as possible.

When planning the spatial separation, the needs of the children should have top priority!!!

If possible:

- Don't rush things: The final decision to separate does not mean that you should pack your bags and leave immediately.
- The separation and post-separation period should be carefully planned with the children in mind.
- Clarify the living situation of all family members and other parties involved (Where will everyone live? Will the children continue to attend the same school and be able to pursue their usual activities?)
- Planning access rights (When will the children live with whom?)
- When, how and what do we tell the children?
- If necessary or if conflicts remain unresolved: Seek help from professionals, such as mediation or parent counselling.

How do the children experience the pre-separation phase?

In most cases, the separation is preceded by a phase of highly emotionalised conflict or great distance between the parents. Even if the parents try to hide their intentions of separating, the children sense that something in the relationship between father and mother is no longer what it used to be. Insecurity and fear are the most common reaction to this invisible threat.

The separation is often preceded by months or even years of conflict, which the children experience involuntarily as powerless observers. Children often respond to open arguments by interfering ('Stop arguing!'). They quickly realise the threat to their family situation and are willing to do anything to end the parental conflict.

They might be showing **conspicuous behaviour** such as e.g:

- Both emotional and spatial withdrawal
- aggressive or depressive moods
- psychosomatic symptoms such as stomach aches and headaches, eating disorders, repeated wetting at night ... etc.



The objective is to 'force' the parents into taking care of the problem child together, and possibly bring them closer together again.

In addition, the **children** get involved and **take responsibility**, for example by:

- taking sides with the supposedly 'innocent' spouse
- comforting the parents
- looking for solutions to resolve conflicts
- making themselves available as dialogue partners

This means that the children take on an adult role which is emotionally overwhelming. This assumption of responsibility leads to **feelings of guilt** in the event of a separation, the feeling of not having done the right thing or even having failed.

Conflict of loyalty

There is a risk that the children are caught between two camps. They can feel torn between the positions of their parents, as they love them both.

What can you do as parents?

- Try to avoid arguing in front of the children.
- The responsibility for the marital conflict remains solely with the adults. Make this clear to the children..
'We have trouble with each other at the moment. This has nothing to do with you. We are doing our best to get things back on track ...'
- The children should not interfere in the conflicts or take responsibility.
- 'Mum and dad will sort it out. You don't need to worry...'
- Do not ask the child to take your side.
- Do not criticise or badmouth the other parent in front of the child.
- Support the children in their trust and love for the other parent.
'Even if I argue with your dad, it's between him and me. He is your dad and loves you and you love him. That is also very important to me 'or' ... I am happy when you and mum get along well!'
- Emphasise that there is not just one person to blame in an argument, but that both partners are responsible for the situation.
'It always takes two to argue. We've tried to get along, but unfortunately it's not working'.
- Despite all the emotional stress during this time of conflict, try to make your child feel as safe as possible.
'It's very difficult at the moment and you can probably tell that we're often nervous/sad, but mum and dad are doing their best to sort it out.'
- Even if the children's expressions of sadness, anger and despair cause you feelings of guilt and are difficult to bear, it is important to accept and respect these expressions of emotion.
'I can see that you are sad (or angry) and I understand that.'
- Try to be sensitive and recognise the child's needs, i.e. recognise the child's signals, interpret them correctly and react appropriately to them
- Under no circumstances should you try to talk the children out of their feelings.
'You don't need ... to be sad ... to be afraid etc.!'

3. Supporting children

If the announcement of the parents' separation can be planned AND it is possible for both parents to be present together, it is advisable to consider the following points:

- It is best to choose a time when the parents can already say something about the new way of life: *Who will be living where soon ? - Who will take the child to sports - Who will sign what from school? Who pays the pocket money?* The lasting things should also be mentioned, e.g. the regular visits from both grandparents or the fact that the planned birthday party took place.
- In the previous home, a place should be chosen where an undisturbed conversation is possible, but which can also be left again - e.g. seating area or cozy carpet - but not in the children's room.
- Although both parents will inevitably have their own views, it is helpful not to discuss these in front of the children. Rather, it can help the situation if the parents try to find the greatest possible common denominator for the content of the communication and keep this in mind during the communication.

Depending on the age of the children, rules of thumb are useful when communicating. Please refer to the relevant documents.

In each case, the impact of the parents' separation/divorce on the children is discussed. Each age category addresses how parents can support their children.



Children up to 6 years

In the communication

Children from 0-3 years:

- simple message and repeat it a few times during the conversation.
- about 1-2 weeks before the physical separation

Children from 3-6 years:

- Brief and concrete communication regarding the separation and the associated changes.
- Approximately 1-2 weeks before the physical separation.

The impact of parental separation/divorce depends on the age and emotional development of the child.

Fears and feelings of guilt

When the parents are separating, preschool children (0-6 years) often react by showing fear and feelings of guilt. They are confused and overwhelmed because they are unable to understand what is actually happening and why.

Children of this age believe that if one parent can leave, the other can too. They think that if mom and dad stop loving each other, they might also stop loving them. This can lead to fears of separation and loss.

Children's worries: When will I see mom/dad? Where will I live? Will I have to move? Will I still be able to see both grandparents? Will my dog move with me?

Limited emotional abilities

Children of this age are not yet able to differentiate between the feelings of loved ones and their own. Grief, fears and aggression of the parent they are with are taken over and experienced as their own. Just a few months after birth, babies react with fear and stress when their parents show anger.

If the parents are very upset, the children usually hide their own feelings, such as sadness or anger, to avoid any additional strain on them.

Symptoms

- Increased emotional sensitivity: anger, anxiety, crying
- Regression to early childhood behaviors: i.e. wetting and defecating again, thumb sucking, cleanliness, hygiene, ...
- Psychosomatic disorders: Stomach aches and headaches, skin irritations, breathing difficulties, constipation, ...
- Increased anxiety in farewell situations (kindergarten, school)
- Nightmares
- Self-accusations and massive feelings of guilt
- Over-adapted behavior
- Increased aggression and defiant behavior
- Acute separation anxiety when transferring to the other parent



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What parents can do

- Reassure children that mom and dad will always love them and that they will remain a family even if they no longer live together.
- Reassure children that they will never lose a parent.
- Relieve children of blame; "these are adult things!"
- Provide sufficient explanations
- A small child should be able to be with the parent who has moved out regularly and as often as possible in order to build up inner representation and secure the relationship.

Children from 6 to 8 years

In the communication

- Concrete and differentiated communication regarding the associated changes in the children's everyday lives and in their relationship with their parents.
- Appreciate and normalize children's feelings such as sadness and anger.
- Reassure them that the separation is only about mom and dad and that mom and dad still love them just as much.
- Communicate about 3-4 weeks before the separation.

Children between the ages of 6 and 8 often react very emotionally to the separation or divorce of their parents. They therefore need support from both parents in order to understand and cope with these emotions.

Grief

Children of this age usually react with sadness and/or anger to their parents' decision to separate, expressing this through crying and sobbing.

Conflict of loyalty

The conflict of loyalty is at the forefront in this age group. Children try to do justice to both parents in their actions.

If parents try to get the child on their side, they risk a "tug-of-war" of their child's feelings. Some parents tell their child bad things about their partner in order to achieve this (e.g.: he is the reason why I have to cry so much, why we are doing so badly). From the adult's point of view, this accusation may be true, but the child is caught between two chairs and will come out of this tug-of-war as the loser. The resulting conflict of loyalty triggers a strong sense of helplessness and powerlessness in the child.

Children often feel a great longing for the absent parent, whom they see less often due to unequal contact rights.

As a result, they don't always want to openly show the anger they actually feel towards them. The parent who is present therefore often becomes a projection screen for negative emotions. The "parent left alone" often feels lonely and experiences a longing for the child. In order to protect the children from assuming responsibility and possible feelings of guilt, it is important to communicate this gently when they meet again ("I was thinking about you", "I missed you").



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Desire for parents to be reunited

The child's greatest wish is for their parents to get back together. This may result in them seeing it as their job to solve their parents' problems. It is not healthy for children to take on the roles of their parents; they should be allowed to continue being children.

Aggression towards themselves and others

Studies have shown that there is a risk of negative influence when children observe their parents arguing. It affects the way they deal with and solve their problems. In many cases, physical arguments in particular can lead to the child reacting violently towards their peers. Children do not get used to their parents arguing - on the contrary - every argument leads to greater insecurity.

Other symptoms

- Withdrawal and overadaptation
- Anxiety and obsessive-compulsive symptoms
- Psychosomatic disorders (headaches, stomach ache, etc.)
- Refusal to perform and concentration disorders

What parents can do

- Reassure the child that they can continue to have a good relationship with both parents
- Show clear and consistent affection
- Communicate to the child that the ex-partner will continue to care for and love the child
- Promise the child that they will continue to have access to the other parent and other family members and keep that promise
- Provide enough space for joint activities with both parents
- Avoid badmouthing the other parent in front of the child!
- Avoid conflicts and arguments in front of the child!
- If the child behaves conspicuously, be patient and allow the child time and space to express their feelings. Acknowledge the child's reactions: e.g. "It's okay that you're sad."
- Avoid turning the child into an ally, comforter, spy or confidant.

Children from 9 to 12 years

Upon notification

- Parents or perhaps the parent who initiates the separation should assume responsibility.
- Encourage the child to allow feelings such as anger, sadness, disappointment, fear, but possibly also relief regarding the separation.
- Help the child to rephrase the term "guilty parent" as "taking responsibility for a changing situation." Stay as close to the truth as possible. If necessary, it is important to give the child/children time to realize the parents' final decision and not to expect any reaction from the child for the time being.
- Announce upcoming changes to the children.

Children in this age group are already more advanced in their thinking and are able to understand different points of view. Most 9 to 12-year-olds can understand or even comprehend some of the reasons that led to their parents' separation.



Rejection of one parent

Even if 9 to 12-year-olds are already able to understand both parents, the assessment standards are still undifferentiated and follow a black-and-white, good-evil thought pattern. This results in the attribution of one parent as “the good guy” and the other as “the bad guy”. The children take sides with the parent they believe is not to blame and is more helpless.

The rejection of one parent due to this particular “sense of justice” leads to strong feelings of guilt towards this parent.

For fear of losing both, the child takes sides, usually with the parent they live with. Children willingly take on the role of referee and advisor for one parent and almost offer themselves as a substitute partner.

They may also resist spending time with the parent who they see as being at fault for the current situation.

As a parent, you should not allow this to happen. Make it clear to your child that kindness and respect towards both parents is important to you. Specific examples can help here: if the child does not like a particular teacher, they must still remain respectful in their contact with them.

Anger

Children of this age range can feel great anger and equally great powerlessness regarding the separation.

Psychosomatic complaints

The emotional stress experienced by children during the separation and divorce of their parents can contribute to the occurrence of psychosomatic complaints such as headaches and stomach aches.

Changes in the social environment

The divorce of parents can lead to problems and changes in the social environment. In order to cope with the loss of security and support, children often join peers who are struggling with similar emotional problems or behavioral problems. This in turn can lead, for example, to failure at school and conspicuous behavior or over-adaptive behavior.

Playing parents off against each other

In contrast to younger children, 9 to 12-year-olds sometimes try to exploit the separation situation to their advantage and play their parents off against each other. For example, they say/do mean things or accuse their parents of having changed.

A regular exchange between the parents regarding the children can counteract this behavior. The experience that both parents are in the same boat despite the separation provides the children with security and stability.

What parents can do

Talk to him about his new life

Children at this pre-pubertal age need their parents to talk about the separation and the (subsequent) new course of life. They need a framework that allows them to talk about their worries, fears and suffering and to get an impression of how their parents are feeling. It is perfectly fine if the parents do not always agree, but they should always agree with the child.



It is also important to always be honest when the child asks if mom and dad are getting back together!

Let the child express their anger in a controlled manner

As a parent, you should show your child love and support, but also give them space to express their anger about the separation. Most children long for their parents to get back together. If - as in most cases - this is not an option, be honest with your child. False hopes are out of place here.

Avoid conflicts in front of your child

As parents, you must hide mutual anger from your child. Try to appreciate the good things about your ex-partner that made you get married. Some of these qualities are still there.

Avoid your child having to make a decision

Most parents don't realize how often they put their child in a decision-making situation between themselves and the other parent. This destroys the relationship between the two of you, which only leads to dissatisfaction, arguments and anger between you and your ex-partner. This will not help your child in any way.

Inform your teachers and family doctor about your situation

Pre-teens often don't want to talk about their feelings. People in their daily lives witness many situations in which it becomes clear how the children are coping with the separation and how they are behaving outside the family context. This also makes it easy to observe and discuss changes in behavior. Allow support for yourself and your child.

Teenagers from 13 to 18 years

Teenagers - children between the ages of 13 and 18 - deal with their parents' divorce differently than younger children. Parental conflict has a different impact on teenagers than on younger children.

Social peer group

In addition to their more developed cognitive skills, teenagers have a large social peer group that offers them support when their parents divorce. Their strongest social outlet is their peer group of friends rather than their family. Parents' influence on their children is limited. As teenagers, they increasingly turn to their social peer group or withdraw socially.

The loss of a relationship with a parent

This is the loss of an important source of help, guidance and direction that is needed at this age. Inconsistent behavior and the lack of parental control, discipline and support can have a distressing effect on the child and cause long-lasting problems. Especially at this age, teenagers are in a social experimentation phase where the lack of a healthy parental role model can have a negative impact on the child's social development.

A family with a single parent has many needs. Due to the "forced" assumption of **family responsibility**, the young person is under pressure to grow up faster. This includes, for example, supporting the upbringing of their younger siblings or caring for their unstable parent.



“We'll make it better”

Some teenagers show a more mature reaction to their parents' separation; they want to “do better”. However, this can cause them to have concerns about intimate relationships and worry about sex and marriage well into adulthood.

Anger and frustration

Young people are so developed in their thinking that they can understand various systems, e.g. family or legislation. Nevertheless, they have quite simple, idealistic ideas about these systems. For this reason, they often react with anger or great indignation when something does not go according to their ideas.

In general, young people are often frustrated by a lack of power and control. They feel helpless and disrespected by others. They believe that no one is interested in them and that their feelings don't count. Some young people think that too much is expected of them and refuse to play along with these “unfair” expectations and hopes. Such situations almost inevitably lead to anger and frustration on both sides.

It is difficult to come to terms with the parents' divorce. In the absence of parental care and supervision and the necessary support, there is a risk that young people will display negative behavior.

Out of anger and frustration, teenagers may join other “rejected” teenagers who are struggling with emotional problems or behavioral problems. This in turn can lead to consequences such as failure at school, breaking rules and laws, risky sexual experiences and drug or alcohol abuse.

What parents can do

Help them to focus more on school, socializing and hobbies. Encourage your children to open up to new and different interests and help them to realize their personal goals.

As they get older, their cognitive skills and their ability to change perspectives also increase. They begin to understand that their parents, just like all other people, have strengths and weaknesses and learn to accept these. As a parent, you can accept your child's perspective and anger and still guide them to find the causes of their problems.



4. Impaired parent-child relationship

Children are often afraid of losing both parents during separations. As a result, in high-conflict situations, a child may take sides in order to avoid this. It usually chooses the side of the parent with whom it spends more time. This can happen gradually or suddenly. Sometimes it is a reaction of the children to the many arguments between the parents.

However, it may be a controlled, sometimes deliberate process by one parent to alienate the child from the other parent.

Some separation experts speak of PAS 'parental alienation syndrome' when one or both parents negatively influence the children's affection for the other parent, more or less actively. It is important to be vigilant in order to avoid an alienation process.

Use the following list of guidelines to get a sense of how you can interact well with your child:

1. Do not give the child the freedom to decide when and how often they want to see the other parent. These decisions are made by the parents together or by the court.
2. Do not tell the child every detail of the failed relationship with the justification of wanting to be 'honest' with the child. This is extremely destructive and painful for the child and belongs at the adult level.
3. In the presence of the child, do not blame the other parent for problems, family break-ups and changes in lifestyle. Please keep children out of it and always remember that children have elephant ears and often pretend not to listen to adult conversations.
4. Do not ask the child to choose one parent and to tell them that they only ever want to be with them. Children usually do not want to reject either parent and try to avoid this topic.
5. Do not ask the child to spy on or question the other parent for your own benefit. A child wants to be loyal to both parents and will not do so (willingly).
6. Do not listen to telephone conversations between the child and the other parent in order to obtain information that you can use in a targeted manner.
7. Do not tell the child how sad you are when they are not there. This can cause strong feelings of guilt in the child. As a result, the child will not know whether it is okay to have fun with the other parent.
8. Allow your children to transport their belongings (books, teddy bears, toys, clothes, etc.) between residences.
9. Do not tell the child what they are 'missing' when they are away, e.g. your uncle and the family comes to visit when you are not there.
10. Do not keep asking the child whether the other parent was violent or violated boundaries. It may be out of concern because you have suffered violence yourself. Try to let your child know that there are options for communicating when they are worried, e.g. you, at school, at the children and youth telephone...
11. Do not support the child in their frustration when they are upset about the other parent's strictness, e.g. 'I have to go to bed so early, I can't be on my mobile phone like when I'm with you'
12. Do not promise the child something that you do not keep. Your own unreliability towards your child will make it difficult for you to keep / regain their trust.

5. About parental custody (autorité parentale)

The concept of parental custody was very imprecise until the revision of divorce law in 2018, as there was no clear legal regulation for joint parental custody in Luxembourg until then. Instead, the family court judges resolved disputes with a great deal of pragmatic expertise.

Until recently, fathers saw themselves at a disadvantage compared to mothers. The uncertainty was great.

Joint or sole?

The current divorce law officially permits both options: That of joint parental custody (autorité parentale conjointe) and that of sole parental custody (autorité parentale exclusive).

According to the law, joint parental custody should be the rule. Sole parental custody should only be established if joint custody is not possible and the child's welfare is at risk as a result.

The two terms are often labelled 'good' or 'bad' in the press, but it is not as simple as that..

As desirable as it is for children to have two parents who lovingly care for them (regardless of whether the parents are separated or live together with the children), it is important to differentiate carefully in the event of a parental separation.

Is joint parental care always the better choice? What conditions are necessary for joint parental custody to be successful? Can there be differences? Do differences in parenting style harm the child? Who decides if the parents cannot agree?

What does parental custody involve?

What does joint parental custody actually mean and what could it look like in everyday life? The law simply states that in this case the parents must make all decisions affecting the development of the child together.

First of all, it is important to know that the concept of parental care extends to all areas of the child's life. This usually includes

- legal representation
- residence (police registration and actual residence)
- health (physical, mental, emotional)
- upbringing (parenting style, religious or non-religious)
- Education (school, vocational training)
- financial welfare



The major and minor questions of life

A distinction must also be made between the 'major' and the 'minor' questions. The 'major' questions are of crucial importance for the further development of a child (actes non usuels).

The 'minor' questions are everyday questions and decisions that are certainly not of fundamental importance for a child's development when considered individually. They do however have an impact on a child's development due to their everyday nature. (actes usuels).

The following table provides examples for further definition of the concepts:

	Questions of fundamental importance (actes non usuels)	Everyday Questions (actes usuels)	Grey area, difficult to delimit
Health	Operations, psychotherapy, vaccinations,	Cold, stomach ache	Nutrition
Residence	Residence, relocation	Inland holidays	Holidays abroad
Education	Religious or non-religious Education	Manners, etiquette	Style more or less authoritarian
School education	Choice of school, curriculum or career, who is allowed to pick up the child and who is not?	Who does the child sit next to in the classroom?	Visit to the school psychologist
Asset management	Management of the assets as a whole	Pocket money	Pocket money

The following guidelines usually apply to the case of joint parental custody:

The parents must find a common line or make a joint decision on all issues that are of fundamental importance for the child's good development.

In everyday matters, each parent can make their own decisions as long as they are not contrary to the child's welfare.

The following principles usually apply to the case of sole parental custody:

The parent who has parental custody alone decides on issues that are of fundamental importance for the child's proper development. The non-custodial parent has no say, but may have a right to information.

In everyday matters, each parent (including the non-custodial parent) can make their own decisions, provided they are not contrary to the child's welfare.



In practical terms, the more both parents are willing to recognise the achievements of the other parent and value them in relation to the child, the better the child's development will be (=> see also attachment tolerance/attachment acceptance).

This does not require the parents to always agree and meet regularly to exchange information.

The important thing is that they agree on the broad outlines and communicate this to the child, preferably in a joint message. Counselling centres such as the Familljen Centre and others can provide a suitable framework for this.

Right of access

The central issue in the context of parental custody is the question of where the child lives and when and how much time it spends with each parent.

Terminology :

- place of residence / domicile légal
- **alternating stay** (résidence alternée)
- Visiting and accommodation rights / droit de visite et d'hébergement (does not always have to coincide, but makes it clear that the child may also stay overnight with the parent and can be an intermediary step towards an alternating model)
- Alternating model: The children have two homes, between which they alternate in a mostly fixed rhythm (starting from a ratio of 30:70, one can speak of an alternating model). Does not require joint custody.
- Nest model (also known as the pendulum model): The children live in one home (often the old family home) and the parents take turns looking after, supervising and caring for them
- Residence model: The children live predominantly (more than 70%) with one parent and have regular contact with the other parent as part of visiting and/or overnight rights (at weekends or during the week). Holidays are often split 50:50.
- CNS: Sécurité Sociale card can be requested by both parents as they wish.

6. Tips on right of access

Do's

- **Focus on the child**

When planning, take into account the age and emotional development of the child as well as the nature of the bond with the respective significant others before the separation.

Be open to changes as your children get older. For example, the 50/50 alternating model is often not ideal for toddlers, but appropriate for many children from kindergarten onwards. There are good experiences where children have been at home with both parents from an early age and have experienced this as positive in retrospect as adults.

- **Stay consistent, no short-term changes of plan**

Structure is necessary and offers children security and protection, especially after their world has completely changed due to their parents' divorce.

There is nothing worse than a parent not turning up for a long-awaited visit. Try to avoid last-minute cancellations and sudden changes of plans. Be reliable!

- **Communication guidelines**

Work out a plan in advance and write it down on a (family) calendar, which should hang in a clearly visible place in both parents' homes (e.g. fridge). This way, the children will always be able to check when and where they will see mum or dad (provides security and structure).

The way you communicate and negotiate visitation arrangements needs to be mutually agreed upon. Emails or text messages can be a solution if verbal interaction over the phone or face to face is still too challenging

If a change in visiting arrangements is necessary, propose something concrete (in writing) if necessary. If you have not heard anything within a set period of time (e.g. 48 hours), then act as suggested.

- **Optimism**

A lot of things are difficult in the beginning. You can learn to manage the new situation and integrate the pending changes into your life.

Please always remember: Both of you should wish your child a good time with the other parent.



Don'ts

- **Do not argue or discuss in front of your children**

Discussions about custody or changes to the visiting schedule should only ever take place between the parents (not in the presence of the children).

- **Do not use children as messengers**

Don't instruct your child to tell the other parent that you will not be able to see the child for another two weeks. This puts the child in a very difficult situation. Children should not have to suffer because their parents do not talk to each other!

- **Do not talk badly about the other parent**

Children are very susceptible to anger, resentment or accusations/blame. *'If your father/mother wasn't so angry, we wouldn't be in this situation now'*. The child is then caught in a difficult conflict of loyalty.

- **Do not use your children as spys**

Don't ask your child about what the other parent is and isn't doing.

7. On the way to new relationships and bonds

The end of a relationship is often accompanied by uncertainty for most people.

Only a few people are immediately ready to enter a new relationship, unless they already found closure. This can happen if a partner was already thinking about breaking up before the relationship ended. Others enter into volatile relationships but don't want a permanent commitment.

It is particularly important for the children to gain confidence in the new family structure and to get used to living in two family worlds.

Often, but not always, the path from separation to a new partnership involves three stages:

1. both parents initially live alone or only with their children (single-parent family)
2. mother or father meets a new partner and enters into a relationship
3. mother or father lives together with the partner and a new family ('stepfamily' or 'patchwork family') is formed.

Patchwork family and patchwork situations

The most important prerequisite for the success of the stepfamily “business” is that everyone involved accepts this status: “We are a patchwork family and not a family of origin”.

The patchwork family is created from partial families, from “family remnants” (hence the name) with sometimes very different habits, daily routines and manners.

The people in the patchwork family therefore either live together permanently, sometimes both adults bring their own children, or they only spend time together temporarily, as both adults have their own living environment for whatever reason.

Some of the children live predominantly with one parent or with both parents in an alternating model.

For the entirety of these constellations, we therefore prefer to speak of **patchwork situations** rather than patchwork families in the following, as the term “family” implies a very specific constellation for many people, which is only given to a very limited extent here.

Due to the changing presence or absence of children and adults, irregularity is the rule in this constellation. Developing a new, shared “lifestyle” in the new family form requires time, a lot of patience, exchange and a willingness to compromise.

As the biological parent, the ex-partner is not a member of this patchwork situation, but remains jointly responsible for their children. Contact and a bond with him/her is important for their emotional development. In the interests of the children, the biological parents should continue to strive for an objective and constructive exchange on parenting issues.

In addition to any children of their own, a new partner also brings their own family of origin into the patchwork situation. This means that the children will have new step-grandparents in addition to their previous grandparents. It can take some time and sensitivity to find their role in the new family unit.

The foundation of the patchwork situation is the couple. Even in the new family situation, the partners should not neglect their relationship as a couple. This includes giving each other time, attention and care. It is also about finding a good balance between the needs of the adults and those of the children.

Intimacy - characteristic of the family - has different boundaries in the patchwork family, which must also be consciously drawn (even between the unrelated children). For example, dealing with the issues of the body, shame and nudity within the family - which is open and uncomplicated in many families of origin - is not necessarily a given



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in the patchwork family. Particularly during puberty, special attention must be paid to the protection of privacy and intimacy.

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Tips for the biological parent in the patchwork family

- Together with your partner, consider whether you can afford to live together. A fresh start in a new home has a number of advantages (more space, neutrality and equality).
- Think through and discuss with your partner how much responsibility he/she can or wants to take on towards your children. Legally speaking, biological parents have considerably more duties and rights towards the children, but in everyday practice, the stepparent will have to find their place in the family as a “co-parent” (this can also be made legally binding under the new divorce law if the custodians agree). This is usually a lengthy adjustment process that requires flexibility and perseverance.
- Be aware that no one can “replace” an absent parent (no matter how loving and responsible your new partner may be). Your children have the right to like several people (mother, father, stepmother, stepfather, siblings, stepsiblings, etc.) in different ways and to experience relationships of varying quality and intensity without feeling guilty.
- Photos: If possible, think together about which photos hang where.

Tips for the stepparent

- Avoid the “savior” role. Single parents have usually learned to manage a lot on their own. Don't expect immediate “love” between you and your stepchildren. Instead, try to build a respectful, friendly relationship with them. Joint activities are helpful here. Only when a stable relationship of trust has developed can you intervene in their upbringing after consultation with your partner.
- Seek your own role as an additional contact person for the child - but only if this is what the child wants - and do not try to take on the role of a parent.
- - Avoid rivalries with your new partner's “ex”. This will meet with resistance (especially from the children) and worsen the atmosphere in the family. In this sense, it is also strongly advisable to avoid using the term “father/mother” for the stepparent: even if there is no longer any contact with a biological parent, they cannot be replaced from a psychological point of view.

What children need in the patchwork situation

- Social reliability (rituals, habits, close caregivers...).
- Binding security
- Their “own” place in the family. If possible, the “visiting children” should also have their own room, or at least their own furniture in a specific place (bed, armchair, cupboard for personal belongings, etc.). This allows them to withdraw from family life and counteracts the (natural) jealousy between the children.
- Times of undivided attention from the biological parents: activities and conversations alone with the mother or father make it easier for the children to communicate their feelings and needs.
- Regular exchanges within the family, including in the event of conflicts (e.g. “family conferences”).
- Support with all questions that arise for the children in relation to their visits to the other biological parent and their new family (e.g. What position does the child have there? Is it jealous of children who live with dad/mom there? Is a new child perhaps favored there? What should be done if the children no longer want to go?) Here it is important to accompany the children sensitively without devaluing the other parent. It is very important for the children to feel that their feelings are understood and accepted. If they are already older, they can be encouraged to express themselves to the other biological parent. With younger children, the mother/father can be a “spokesperson” for the ex-partner if they wish.
- Loving persistence: Many children need time to get used to changes, even if these suggestions are sensible and would make everyday life much easier. If suggestions to do something together with the “new” adult are rejected, simply repeat them more often and do not comment on them. Keep at it on the adult level.