

## Factsheet

For single parents in England and Wales August 2015

Freephone

0808 802 0925

Gingerbread Single Parent Helpline

## Making arrangements for your children

This factsheet will help you make effective arrangements for your child about where they live, and when they spend time with each parent and their family and friends. These are important decisions for all the family, and there are many things to consider, so it may take time to find an arrangement that works for you all.

Most parents are able to make effective arrangements between themselves, but others need some help. Details of organisations offering support are listed on page five. Whatever arrangements you make, the important thing is that you have tried your best to come to an arrangement that's best for your child and for you as a family.

For information tailored to your circumstances, contact our helpline on 0808 802 0925. Calls are free from landlines and mobiles.

### Putting your child first

Most parents want to do their best for their children, so keep your child at the heart of the decision about where your child lives and when they spend time with each parent. Children have a right to a relationship with both their parents and it's important that you and your child's other parent listen to your children, and understand their needs and wishes before making decisions.

Each family is different and for some having a relationship with both parents won't be possible. This could be because one parent chooses not to or it's not safe. Where parents do want to be involved in the child's life and it is safe for this to happen, it's usually in the child's best interest if:

- They are brought-up by both parents, whether or not they live together
- Each parent supports their child to enjoy a positive relationship with their other parent
- Children are clear about the arrangements for spending time with each parent, and there are no sudden changes in arrangements unless it's unavoidable
- Children are not exposed to continuing conflict; this is both distressing and harmful for them

- Children are supported to keep in touch with important people in their lives, such as wider family members
- New partners support the arrangements you've made, and have a good relationship with your child.

Keep in mind that it is the ability to communicate, the quality of the relationships, and the ability to focus on how things will work for the child that make an arrangement work well.

### Making the arrangements

Every situation is different and your family needs to make decisions that work best for everyone involved. Some decisions will be easy to make and some will be hard. Below are some useful tips to help you have effective conversations and ensure the best outcomes for your child. On page five are details of organisations that can help you if you can't agree.

#### Prepare

Be prepared for the conversations you need to have about the arrangements for your child. Decide what aspects you need to agree on, which of these are most important and what information you need to help you make these decisions. Find a neutral place to talk away from your child, and think beforehand what compromises you're prepared to make.

### Focus on your child's needs

When parents separate, emotions can run high and it can be hard to know what to do for the best.

Whatever your feelings, it's really important to put your child's needs first. These needs will vary depending on: their age, health, abilities, life and family experiences and their personality. It's helpful to consider the following:

- The age of your child – babies and younger children will have different needs to older children
- The wishes and feelings of your child, taking into account their age and understanding
- The likely effect on your child of any changes in their circumstances
- Where your child's friends and other relatives live, and how your child will continue to see them
- Where your child goes to school, and whether they have any special classes or out-of-school activities.

### Be as open and honest as possible

This applies to your thoughts and feelings as well as information about your future plans. Try to explain the reasons behind the arrangements you're proposing and why they would be most suitable for your child.

### Try to see it from the other side

Trying to understand the concerns of the other parent will help your child have better relationships with you both. This is easier said than done when you're hurt and angry, but try to listen to what is being said and respond to that. Understanding your own feelings can help you understand the other point of view.

### Take one step at a time

Try to deal with one issue at a time and agree on the easier things first. Go back to your priority list if you feel the discussion is going off track. If you feel you're getting stuck, or emotions are running high, try meeting at a different time.

### Be practical

When considering when your child will be spending time with each parent, you need to be realistic about the day-to-day practicalities, which will be different for each family. Some things you might want to consider:

- How will your child get to and from school or childcare?
- If you have more than one child, do they have different needs which require different arrangements?

- If your child sleeps over at both parents' houses, is there enough room and what are the sleeping arrangements?
- How will the things your child needs on a day-to-day basis be available for them?
- What will the travel arrangements be and who will take responsibility for them?
- What help and resources do you have access to?

### Think through the options

Suggest as many options as you can for how and when your child spends time with each of you, and try to find solutions to practical problems.

### Agreeing financial support for your child

Both parents are responsible for supporting their child financially. Agreeing on financial support is an important part of making an arrangement for your child. There is an [online tool](#) to help you. Also, see our factsheet [Making arrangements for child maintenance](#).

### Living with both parents

Some families have an arrangement where the child spends significant time (including overnight stays) with both parents. This is known as shared residence or shared care. This option is one to consider when you're making your decision about where your child lives. Good communication about day-to-day issues and a willingness to be flexible will make this type of arrangement work best.

### Supporting your child

#### Don't argue or fight in front of your child

If you're finding it difficult to come to an agreement without arguing, don't do this within earshot of your child, even if you're on the phone. It is hurtful and distressing for them, and can damage your relationship. There are organisations listed on page five that can support you to talk to each other.

#### Communicate with your child

Your son or daughter may be worrying about things that have not occurred to you. It is common for children to blame themselves for their parents' separation. Explain that it's not their fault, and keep reassuring them. This is particularly important for younger children.

You may feel you're protecting your child by not telling them what's going on, but you could be doing the opposite. Children want to be involved and listened to, but they should not be expected to make the final decisions about what happens.

Often children are not aware of their parents' problems and a separation may be a real shock to them. Give your child time to adjust to their new situation. If your child doesn't seem to be coping, you can seek help from the organisations listed in our factsheet [Support for children and young people](#).

### **If you are concerned for the safety of your child**

Domestic violence and other forms of abusive, inappropriate, unsafe or destructive behaviour can make it unsafe for a child to have contact with their other parent. In these circumstances you're likely to need legal help when making arrangements for your child.

It can be possible for a child in these circumstances to still have a relationship with their parent, as long as there's a safe way for this to happen. It may be that a child's time with that parent needs to be supervised, or for contact to take place in a contact centre.

If you're concerned for the safety of your child, get help and advice as soon as you can (in the first instance this may be the police, social services, NSPCC or legal help). See page five for organisations you can call.

### **When a parent doesn't want to be involved**

Sometimes a child's parent doesn't want to be involved in their life. There could be many reasons for this, which are hard to understand. You can't force a parent to be involved, but you can ensure you've done all you can to encourage it.

## **Recording and reviewing arrangements**

### **Recording what you have agreed**

When an agreement is made you should all be clear about what's going to happen. Some parents find it helpful to write down the arrangement to avoid confusion or disagreements later on. Be aware that although something is written down it doesn't make it legally binding. Arrangements will need to change if they're not working for your child.

### **Parenting plans**

A parenting plan is an agreement made by separated parents on how their children are cared for and supported. It is a useful tool to guide you on what specifics parents need to consider when working out arrangements for your child. See this [free CACASS guide](#) for more information.

## **Review arrangements**

The decisions you make don't have to be set in stone. If you're struggling to reach an agreement or aren't sure what will work, suggest trying an arrangement and setting a date to review it.

You should be prepared to review arrangements as your child grows up and circumstances change. As your child gets older they will have their own opinions on what works for them, and will have their own plans and interests to consider. Older children are likely to need more flexible arrangements.

If it's in your child's best interest to change the arrangement, and you all agree, you can do so at any time. If a court has decided when your child should be spending time with each parent and an order is in place you can still change the arrangement, but you should get some legal advice first.

## **Tips to make it work**

### **Plan ahead**

It helps to plan so that everyone knows where they stand and to avoid misunderstandings. If it's difficult to plan ahead, for example if you work shifts, try to agree some basic guidelines. These could include how many days a week a child spends with each parent and how much notice you should both give. If there's a school trip or a friend's party that affects the usual arrangements, give the other parent as much notice as you can.

### **Avoid sudden changes to plans if possible**

It's difficult for everyone if plans change at short notice, but this will sometimes happen. Try to be as flexible as you can, but review arrangements if they frequently need changing at short notice.

### **Agree arrangements for significant days**

Try to agree in advance how your child will spend important dates, such as birthdays and religious festivals. It's common for parents to take turns seeing their children on special days, alternating each year. Older children should be involved in the decisions.

### **Make arrangements for holidays**

It's easier to reach an agreement by planning ahead. It's common for parents to share school holidays. Depending on your child's age and understanding, he or she could be involved in planning the arrangements so they feel included and secure.

If you or your child's other parent are worried about your child going away, share as much information as possible about the trip. This could include travel and accommodation arrangements, and contact details.

### **Taking a child abroad**

Depending on whether your child's other parent has parental responsibility, you may need consent to take your child abroad.

For more information about parental responsibility see our factsheet [Parental responsibility](#).

If your child has a relationship with their other parent and sees them regularly, let them know the travel arrangements, even if you don't need their consent.

**If you're the only person with parental responsibility** – you don't need the consent of the other parent to take your child abroad.

**If there's someone else with parental responsibility** – you need their consent unless you have a residence order or child arrangements order where you are named as the parent with residence – see below.

**If you have a child arrangements order stating that your child lives with you** – you can take them abroad for up to one month without the consent of anyone else with parental responsibility, unless there is a court order preventing you.

**If you have a child arrangements order which stipulates when your child stays with each parent** – you will need to stick to arrangement in the order, so in practice, you will probably need consent so that you don't break the terms of the order.

### **Get support when things feel difficult**

You might want to share your experiences and get support from friends or other single parents who have been through the same situation.

Joining a support group or online forum such as a Gingerbread group ([www.gingerbread.org.uk/groups](http://www.gingerbread.org.uk/groups)) or online forum ([www.gingerbread.org.uk/forum](http://www.gingerbread.org.uk/forum))

can be helpful and supportive. However, you may need more professional help. Below are details of the help available.

Don't be hard on yourself if the final arrangements you make are not completely ideal. Just do your best, be reasonable, and keep your child at the heart of the decisions.

### **Help when you can't agree**

Not all parents find it easy to come to an agreement, and some need help to find a solution. Our factsheet [Help when you can't agree](#) goes through the options available to you. Below is a summary of those options.

#### **Helping you talk**

When a relationship breaks down it can be difficult to talk about issues such as arrangements for your child without getting upset or angry. Organisations such as Relate and The Parent Connection offer help to: enable you to understand your own feelings and behaviour; see things from both sides and talk as calmly as possible to each other about the situation. Their details are on page five.

#### **Mediation**

Mediation can help resolve disputes on practical issues with the guidance of a trained professional. It is not legal advice and it is not counselling. You will discuss the issues, and the mediator will make sure you both have your say. Mediation can work if you both want to reach an agreement, even if you hold different views at the start.

#### **Using a solicitor to negotiate**

If negotiating with the other parent directly or using a mediator isn't appropriate or hasn't worked, you could ask a solicitor to help you negotiate. If you feel bullied or intimidated into making an arrangement you don't agree with, or you have experienced domestic violence, then using a solicitor may be more appropriate.

#### **Asking the courts to decide**

Applying to the court should be the last resort, when all other attempts to agree have failed or aren't suitable. Court action can be lengthy and expensive, and parents may not get the outcome they want.

The court will encourage you to reach agreement, but if you cannot agree the court may issue a child arrangements order.

## **Useful organisations**

### **Child Maintenance Options**

**0800 988 0988**

**[www.cmoptions.org](http://www.cmoptions.org)**

Provides information on options for setting up child maintenance payments and how to make a claim to the Child Maintenance Service.

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### **Civil Legal Advice**

**0345 345 4345**

**[www.gov.uk/civil-legal-advice](http://www.gov.uk/civil-legal-advice)**

Can assess your eligibility for legal aid and signpost to local sources of help.

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### **Coram Children's Legal Centre**

**[www.childrenslegalcentre.com](http://www.childrenslegalcentre.com)**

The child law website provides legal advice and information on all aspects of the law affecting children (England only.)

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### **Dad.info**

**[www.dad.info](http://www.dad.info)**

Advice, information and a forum for dads.

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### **Family Mediator's Association**

**01355 244594**

**[www.thefma.co.uk](http://www.thefma.co.uk)**

Provides information on family mediation and local mediation services.

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### **Family Rights Group**

**0808 801 0366**

**[www.frg.org.uk](http://www.frg.org.uk)**

Confidential advice for parents and other family members of children who are involved with children's services.

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### **National Domestic Violence Helpline**

**0808 2000 247**

**[www.nationaldomesticviolencehelpline.org.uk](http://www.nationaldomesticviolencehelpline.org.uk)**

Free 24 hour helpline run in partnership between Women's Aid and Refuge. It is a national service for women experiencing domestic violence, or their friends or family. An interpreting service is available.

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### **National Family Mediation**

**0300 4000 636**

**[www.nfm.org.uk](http://www.nfm.org.uk)**

Can answer general enquiries about mediation, and put callers in touch with local not-for-profit mediation services.

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### **NSPCC**

**0808 800 5000**

**[www.nspcc.org.uk](http://www.nspcc.org.uk)**

For help if you are concerned about a child's safety.

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### **Relate**

**0300 100 1234**

**[www.relate.org.uk](http://www.relate.org.uk)**

Offers a range of services for couples, families and individuals and supports them at all stages of their relationships.

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### **Resolution**

**01689 820 272**

**[www.resolution.org.uk](http://www.resolution.org.uk)**

Association of family law solicitors, who adopt a non-confrontational approach to family problems. They can provide a list of local members. The website has free information on issues such as splitting up, divorce and parenting apart.

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### **Reunite**

**[www.reunite.org](http://www.reunite.org)**

**0116 2556 234**

Charity which provides advice, information and support on all issues related to international parental child abduction, prevention of abduction, international contact issues, and cases of permission to remove a child from the jurisdiction.

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### **Rights of Women**

**0207 251 6577**

**[www.rightsofwomen.org.uk](http://www.rightsofwomen.org.uk)**

Free, confidential legal advice by telephone for women. Specialist areas include family law, lesbian parenting, divorce/relationship breakdown, children/contact issues and domestic violence.

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### **The Parent Connection**

**[www.theparentconnection.org.uk](http://www.theparentconnection.org.uk)**

The website supports parents through separation and parenting difficulties. There are a range of resources including articles, videos and support to develop a new parenting relationship after separation, along with practical ideas to overcome problems.

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## Further help and information

### **Gingerbread Single Parent Helpline**

Freephone 0808 802 0925

[www.gingerbread.org.uk](http://www.gingerbread.org.uk)

Provides free, confidential advice for single parents. No matter the challenge – around your finances, contact arrangements or help you could receive – our trained advisers are here with tailored advice that works for you.

### **One Parent Families Scotland Lone Parent Helpline**

Freephone 0808 801 0323

[www.opfs.org.uk](http://www.opfs.org.uk)

Run by our partner organisation, One Parent Families Scotland, the Lone Parent Helpline provides free, confidential advice and information for single parents in Scotland.

### **More from Gingerbread**

The following related Gingerbread factsheets for single parents are also available:

- > [Parental responsibility](#)
- > [Help when you can't agree](#)
- > [Support for children and young people](#)
- > [Looking after your emotional health](#)

Download them from our [website](#) or call 0808 802 0925 to request them from the helpline

### **Become a Gingerbread member**

Membership is available to single parents in England and Wales. Join a community of thousands of single parents who benefit from the mutual support, free advice and information provided by Gingerbread. You can also meet other single parents at one of our local support groups.

Visit our [website](#), call 0800 018 4318 or email [membership@gingerbread.org.uk](mailto:membership@gingerbread.org.uk)

**Gingerbread**  
Single parents, equal families

Gingerbread, the charity for single parent families, is registered in England and Wales as a company limited by guarantee, no. 402748, and a registered charity, no. 230750. The Gingerbread Single Parent Helpline is supported by the Department for Education, HMRC, The Big Lottery and other funders and is accredited by the Helplines Partnership.

[www.gingerbread.org.uk](http://www.gingerbread.org.uk)

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