

KIDS IN THE MIDDLE

**An Agony Aunt's guide for parting
parents and their children**

by Deidre Sanders

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FOREWORD

Family relationships are fundamental to the happiness and well-being of children and their parents. We know that when parents break up there can be significant, negative impacts for everyone involved.

I recently met with Deidre and the other Agony Aunts and Uncles involved in the Kids in the Middle campaign and they stressed to me how important it is for separating parents to realise the impact of their actions on their children.

When you are going through such a tough emotional time, it can be difficult to pay as much attention to your children as you want to. But this is the time they need your support more than ever. Simple, small steps like the ones in this guide can make a huge difference.

I am committed to doing more to support separating parents and their children. This guide is one of our first steps and I hope that you find it helpful at this most difficult time.



Ed Balls

*Secretary of State for Children,
Schools and Families*

DEIDRE SAYS

“This is a huge and important subject but if you’re trying to cope with your family breaking up, you probably don’t feel like taking in a whole load of information right now. So I’m keeping this as short as I can, but sign-posting you to lots of sources of help you can follow up in your own time.”





When parents part

If your relationship is breaking up you probably feel emotionally battered and physically drained. You can wake having panic attacks in the small hours, day-to-day life feels impossible. You're at your lowest, and it's hard to cope with anyone else's needs – even your children's.

With the best will in the world, it's easy to snap if a little one whines for Daddy when he's just left you for another woman, or a youngster moans that "Mum would have remembered my football kit," when you're struggling to make a home in a tiny flat while your ex lives in the comfortable family house.

But how you and your former partner handle your children's feelings through this crisis will affect the rest of their lives – how they get on at school, how they behave towards you, how likely they are to get into trouble with alcohol and drugs, whether they can form happy relationships, how they will behave as parents.

It's a huge responsibility, just at a time when you don't feel you can cope with anything more. But the basic guidelines on how to protect them from the worst of the fall-out from your relationship breakdown are quite straight-forward.



They do demand patience and determination from you, which will feel tough at times, but you will get the pay-off of children who won't give you such a tough time in the future – as well as growing up happier and more balanced in themselves than they will if caught up in the battles of your break-up.



Don't kid yourself your children aren't being affected

Many parting parents assume that, because they save the rows until the children are in bed or out of the house, they don't know there's anything wrong. They believe that babies and toddlers who aren't yet speaking don't understand the rows and so won't be harmed by them.

In fact, babies, toddlers and children of all ages are like extremely sensitive emotional satellite dishes finely tuned to their parents' reactions. They pick up the merest hint of tension let alone outright anger. They may not say anything about it but will be unsettled by it, feel unhappy about it.

Sooner or later their behaviour will reflect their distress. Babies may cry more – so adding to the strain on you. Small children may play up more or be more clingy. Older children may turn more rebellious and get themselves into trouble at home, at school or even with the law.

▶ Teenagers may hide their feelings and you may assume they are so grown up they are not going to be affected, but research suggests that teenage boys are possibly the most troubled by their parents breaking up. It can help enormously if parents – maybe dads especially – take the time and make it easy for them to talk about how they feel. They may talk most easily in an informal setting, in the car for example, travelling to and from a sports outing, rather than if you sit them down for an earnest heart-to-heart.



Of course try to keep any rows away from the children but be as honest as you can with them. Don't try to pretend nothing is wrong. Say you aren't getting on but emphasise – as long as it's true – that you and your partner both love them. Keep spelling out that it isn't their fault – lots of children blame themselves for their parents' relationship breaking down. Give them lots of cuddles.

Ask the children how they feel, if they have any worries. If you're separating, for example, children can be frantic to know if the cat is still going to live with them, or if they are still going to see Granny, which may not even have occurred to you as a problem.

Remember the importance of familiar routines to children. If you've always gone swimming on Friday evenings or had a roast on Sunday, try to make sure the children still enjoy that with one parent or the other. Look for chances to establish new and welcome routines for them – special breakfast with Dad on Sunday mornings, or cooking lesson with Mum on Friday nights.

“Don't be too proud to ask for help. You're only human and anyone going through a major relationship breakdown needs support.”

Enlist all the help you can to ease the strain on you all – from friends, family, and the helping organisations that are listed in this booklet. Tell your children's school what is going on, so they can recognise any behavioural changes as signs of distress not rebellion.

A failing relationship can make you feel too ashamed to admit it openly but one in three couples with children split up these days. It's sad but it means you are far from alone. Don't be too proud to ask for help. You're only human and anyone going through a major relationship breakdown needs support.

Don't paint your partner as a monster

Whatever your partner may have done, whether you see yourself as the injured party or not, the children you share can never have another mother or father. Much as you may long to write your ex out of your life, you cannot write them out of your children's life.

- ▶ Not only do they almost certainly love their mum or dad, they feel themselves to be at least partly like their other parent as well as you. If you rubbish your ex, they take in bad messages about themselves, which can show up in self-destructive behaviour like doing much worse at school, self-harming or getting involved in damaging relationships.





One simple tip which can help is to stop referring to 'my ex'. Think of them and talk of them as 'my children's mother' or 'my children's father'.

It reframes the relationship and will unconsciously affect how you talk of them, especially around your children, and even how you feel about them.

“Keep reminding yourself your children need the both of you.”

Keep up the contact

When parents split up, the children all too often effectively lose one parent. Sometimes one parent finds the break-up so painful they walk away, sometimes one makes it very hard for the other to stay in touch with the children.

For the children it is like a bereavement. It tends to make them feel insecure, anxious about losing the one parent they have got living with them, wary of loving anyone new in case they get hurt again.



Even if you now hate your children's other parent with a passion, talk to him or her if at all possible about how you two can work together to reassure your children. Keep reminding yourself your children need the both of you. Organise regular contact or shared parenting, unless there are serious reasons why this would be a bad idea from the children's point of view – if one parent is abusive, for example, or has serious drug problems.

▶ Once you have agreed arrangements, keep to them, or you risk hurting your children deeply. Even if you are at loggerheads over every other issue, try to leave the children out of any point-scoring.



You will almost certainly need help with this. You may find the idea of even talking to your child's other parent horrendous, and it is so easy to get side-tracked on to the painful issues which led to your break-up.

While it can help to relieve your feelings talking to family and friends, it's not usually a good idea to get them involved in sorting out care and contact arrangements. They will have their own views which can just add to the conflict.

Sources of help for parents

▶ **Parentline** is open 24/7 and specialises in helping parents under stress (0808 800 2222, www.parentlineplus.org.uk). You can offload on to them and talk through what would be best for your children, and download a guide to **Splitting Up**.

▶ **Relate** counselling can help you save your relationship if it's not too late, but can also help end it in the best way possible, or pick up the emotional pieces after it has ended (0300 100 1234, www.relate.org.uk). A **Relate** counsellor can also help you work out how best to help your children and, by giving you emotional support, help you have more attention to spare for how your children are feeling.

As well as offering counselling, face-to-face, by phone or email, **Relate** run a special course called **Parents Apart** for couples who have separated but want to learn how to get along for the sake of their children, and some centres offer mediation.

▶ **Mediation** can help you and your partner negotiate the best arrangements for your children and protect the children from your conflict. They can be especially helpful if in all other respects you and your former partner are at war. As explained, some **Relate** centres offer mediation but mediation can be found in different settings all round the country often via solicitors. Contact the **National Family Mediation Helpline** for details of how they can help you and local mediation services (0845 60 26 627, www.familymediationhelpline.co.uk).

▶ **Your child's school** can be very helpful. It's a good idea to let the school know there are problems at home, because teachers may then react far more helpfully if your children play up. If your children seem seriously distressed, you can ask your GP or the school for a referral for family therapy or for your children to see a child psychologist or psychotherapist. Some schools have **Relate** counsellors available to counsel from the age of 10. Don't see your children having counselling as a sign that you are failing as a parent but as showing how informed you are about their needs at this difficult time.

▶ **YoungMinds Parents Information Service** can help you find how best to support your children through separation or divorce (0800 018 2138, www.youngminds.org.uk).

▶ **Resolution** has 5000 members who are family lawyers committed to a non-confrontational approach (08457 585671, www.resolution.org.uk). They can give details of members near you and publish a guide to **Separation And Divorce: Helping parents help children**, plus a practical set of two charts, one for each carer's home, to help keep track of children's movements and arrangements.

▶ **Contact Centres** can provide a safe, neutral setting for your children to spend time with one or both parents and maybe other family members (0845 4500 280, www.naccc.org.uk).

▶ **One Parent Families/Gingerbread** can advise lone parents on a wide range of legal and financial issues (0800 018 5026, www.oneparentfamilies.org.uk).

▶ **Families Need Fathers** help with shared parenting issues arising from relationship breakdown whether you're the mum or dad, married or unmarried (0300 0300 363, www.fnf.org.uk).

▶ **Child Maintenance Options** provide free, unbiased information and support to help both parents make informed choices about child maintenance and other related issues (0800 988 0988, www.cmoptions.org).

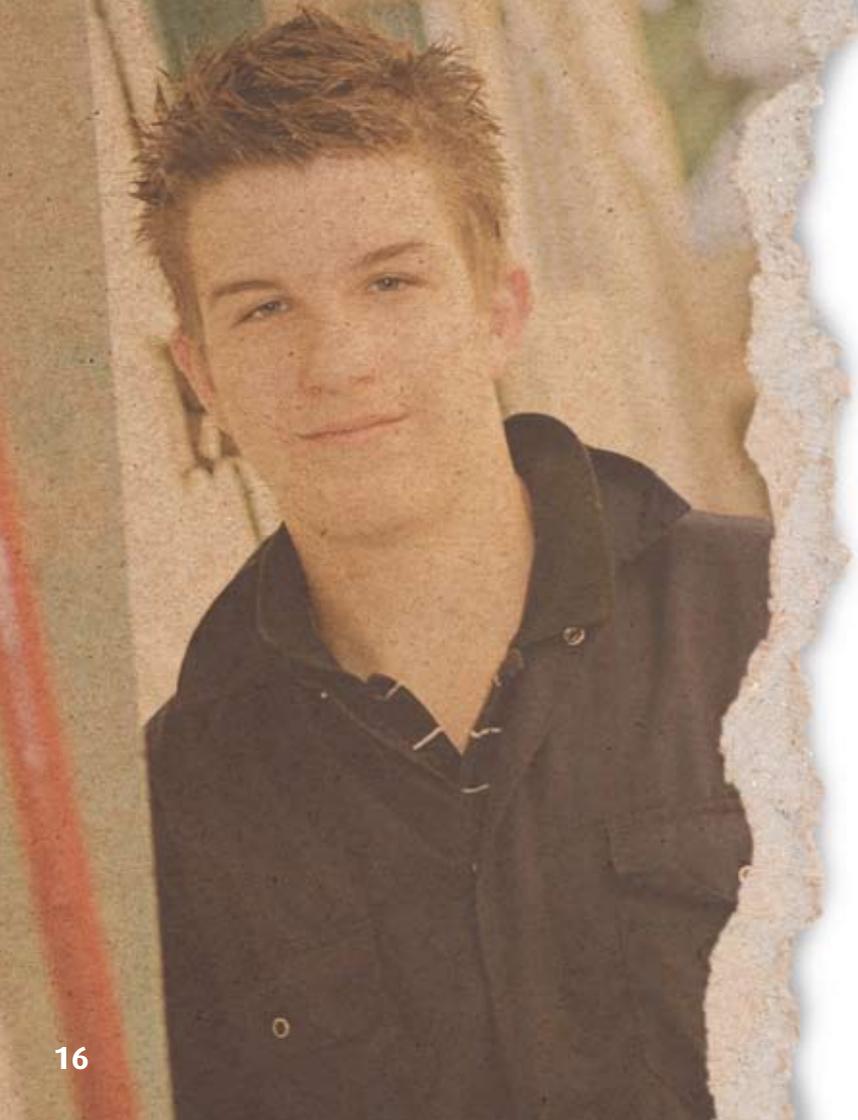
▶ **National Debtline** gives expert advice over the phone or by email. The service is free, confidential and independent (0808 808 4000, www.nationaldebtline.co.uk).

▶ **National Domestic Violence Helpline** advises female victims of violence in the home and can refer to local refuges (0808 200 0247, www.womensaid.org.uk).

▶ **Respect** advises men who are concerned about their abusive behaviour towards their partner (0845 122 8609, www.respect.uk.net).

▶ **Men's Advice Line** helps male victims of domestic violence (0808 801 0327, www.mensadviceline.org.uk).

▶ **Samaritans** are there to listen whenever you feel low, day or night (08457 909090, www.samaritans.org).



If your parents have split up

If you are a young person who has been badly affected by your parents' relationship break-up, don't suffer in silence. It will only make it worse. You are far from alone. One in four under-16s have separated parents.

▶ You might long for your family to stay together but it's outside your power. Don't blame yourself.



It may help to talk to your parents, either for more understanding of what went wrong, or for reassurance that they do still care about you. They may not realise how badly you've been affected, nor what is especially bothering you. If their relationship break-up is involving you moving school, home, perhaps living with another family, you will have a load of practical issues to cope with. It's only normal to find it hard. If your parents seem too over-loaded with their own worries, talk to a good family friend or relative.

▶ You do have the right to some support and understanding for what you're going through too.

If one parent moans to you about the other, say you can't help loving both of them. Ask them to find someone else to confide in. Try to keep up contact with both parents. It may feel more distressing if they are at "daggers drawn", but you will be glad in the long run.

▶ If you're still at school, tell a teacher what has been happening. Then you are likely to get a far more understanding reaction to problems with your schoolwork or behaviour.

You have to use your judgement about sharing your feelings with friends. You are bound to know lots of other young people whose parents have split up. If you've got mates you can trust, they will probably be very understanding, but be wary of giving ammunition to bullies or kids you can't trust.



Make a list of all the practical points that are worrying you or are important to you about how your new life will be, then talk them over with both parents.

Ask both to write down arrangements, for example, including your day-to-day activities so you know who is meant to give you a lift, or who is going to supply the ingredients for cookery. (**Resolution** – see the list of helpful contacts on page 14 – can supply your parents with helpful charts to keep in both homes.)



Tell your parents what routines of family life help you feel at home.





Perhaps it's egg bread on Sunday mornings, singing along together with X Factor on Saturday night, bubble baths on Friday night. These can get lost in the changes a family split brings, but it will help your parents help you if you spell them out.



Sources of help for children and young people

Relate offer a confidential counselling service for children and young people aged 10-25 affected by parental conflict or separation. Sessions may be available in schools, youth clubs and various venues and are usually free. Contact **Relate** direct for details of what is available in your area (0300 100 1234, www.relate.org.uk).

ChildLine is there 24/7 for you to talk over any worry (0800 1111, www.ChildLine.org.uk).

Get Connected help under-25s with a wide range of issues and can put you in touch with the right sort of help near you no matter what your worry (0808 808 4994, www.getconnected.org.uk).

www.itsnotyourfault.org is a friendly website for children and young people whose parents are splitting up.



Helpful reading

There is a range of excellent books for both separating parents and their children, giving far more detailed guidance than is possible here.

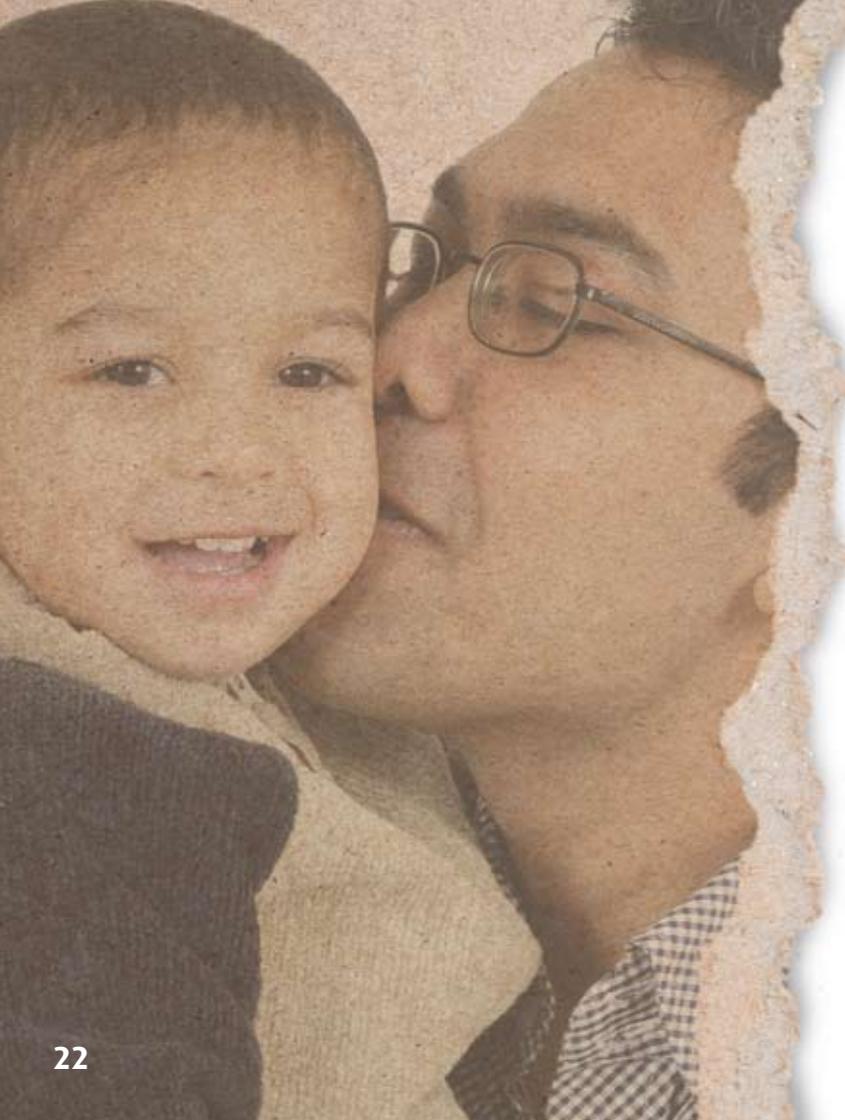
Moving On: Breaking up without breaking down, a Relate guide by Suzie Hayman (Vermilion).

How to Have a Healthy Divorce, a Relate guide by Paula Hall (Vermilion).

Putting Children First: A handbook for separated parents by Karen and Nick Woodall (Piatkus).

Help Your Children Cope With Your Divorce, a Relate guide by Paula Hall (Vermilion).

Teach Yourself Successful Step-parenting by Suzie Hayman (Hodder Education).



Getting Your Children Through Divorce:
A parent's guide to separation by Anne Hooper (Robson).

Helping Children Cope With Divorce by Rosemary Wells (Sheldon Press).

How To Be A Great Divorced Dad by Simon Baker with Alley Einstein (Foulsham).

Two of Everything by Babette Cole (Red Fox) is a reassuring book you can read to under-fives.

Children Don't Divorce by Rosemary Stones (Happy Cat) is helpful for school-age children.

▶ You can order all these at good bookshops or online, or borrow them from your local library for free.

"I hope this helps but of course nothing can take all the pain away of the difficult time your family is going through. If you would like some more help with your particular situation, please email problems@deardeidre.org. I'll look forward to hearing from you."

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All the best,

Deidre

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