

## FAMILY BREAKDOWN

When a family breaks up because parents decide to separate, young people have a lot to deal with. Parents may be tied up with their own emotional issues and not be as supportive as you'd like. You may face many emotions and problems as you get used to new arrangements.

### **Family breakdown**

Family breakdown is becoming more common. Many young people are forced to deal with pain and uncertainty caused by their parent's decision to separate.

- Unfortunately, at the time you most need support and understanding, the adults in your life can often be caught up in fighting or trying to deal with their own grief. You can feel that you have been left out and forgotten.
- Parents might also make the mistake of not talking to you about what is happening. They may think they are protecting you from the unpleasantness of the situation. This may mean you feel confused about what is happening to the family. You might feel angry because you haven't been given a chance to tell anyone what you are thinking or feeling, or to have any say in decisions that will affect your future.

There are many reasons for family breakdown. Whatever the reasons, when parents split up, the children often feel many emotions at the loss of the way the family used to be and feel uncertain about the future. Change can be scary for people of all ages.

### **Questions about family breakdown**

- *What would I do if my parents had a fight?*
- *My sister keeps asking me if Mum and Dad will break up. What do I say?*
- *My parents fight about their work and Mum said that she is finding another job. Will Mum and Dad break up?*
- *My parents have fights a lot and I'm scared they might break up one day.*

Many young people are worried that if their parents fight, they might break up. This can mean worry about where you'll live, go to school, who you'll live with, if you'll see your other parent... But wait a minute - it hasn't happened yet! They may not break up - for some people, arguments are their way of relating - although they could go to counseling to learn new, more peaceful ways to relate to each other.

While it is pretty upsetting, it is important to remember it is not your fault that your parents are fighting - it is **their** behavior, and **their** responsibility.

If your parents' fighting upsets you, can you talk to them about it? Or perhaps talk to a family friend, relative or school counselor who might talk to them on your behalf.

If they do break up, remember, **it is not your fault.**

- Although you may want to help or to do something to stop the relationship ending, this is up to your parents to work out.

- Your parents are separating from each other, not from you.
- They will always be your parents (although it is true that you might not see as much of one or other of them as usual).

### **Effects of family breakdown**

The effects of family breakdown are different for everyone. You may feel quite OK about it all. On the other hand, many young people face difficulties. You may be able to relate to some of these.

- You may feel very anxious and insecure after a family breakdown.
  - Everything you believed to be permanent in your life has suddenly changed – people you trusted to always look after you are now gone.
  - Even in families where the parent's relationship was violent and unhappy, young people can still grieve for the loss of a family life-style that was at least familiar and predictable.
- High levels of anxiety can cause disrupted sleep, loss of appetite, over-eating, low concentration, forgetfulness, nightmares, clumsiness.
- You may start to worry about relationships, love and marriage.
  - You may decide you'll never marry or you may become very careful about choosing your own future partners - this is common for young people who have witnessed their parents' separation.
- Parents might look for your support and start telling you their problems.
  - This may put stress on you, and you might feel embarrassed by some things your parent tells you.
  - It's OK to say you feel uncomfortable about this.
  - If you're not sure how to tell your parent, talk it over with a school counsellor or a health professional.
- You may feel torn between your mother and father.
- You may want to blame one particular person for the breakdown.
  - This can mean that all anger is directed at that one person, and all others are seen as 'innocent victims'.
  - It can be hard to be fair when you feel angry and worried.
- You might worry about things like where you are going to live, who you are going to live with, moving away from your friends and having less money in the home.
- You may have to deal with your parents acting single again (oh no, what if they want to double date with you?!) and becoming aware of your parent's sexuality (what! they don't really do it at their age do they? how disgusting!).
- You may have to face changing family roles.
  - You may have to do some of the things one of your parents used to do, like looking after younger brothers and sisters.

All of these feelings are perfectly natural! Your life has changed dramatically and there was nothing you could do to stop it happening.

### **Grieving**

When a family breaks down, it is only natural to grieve. The feelings of loss can be almost the same as if the parent had died. Because we are all different, we all experience grief in our own way. However there are some emotions that many people go through.

- You may feel shock and numbness, especially if the news of the separation came as a complete surprise to you.
- Another reaction can be 'denial'. You might convince yourself that your parents are only temporarily separated, and will eventually get back together.
- You may feel anger. It is much healthier to find effective ways of dealing with your anger rather than trying to ignore it or to keep it bottled up inside.
- You might find that you feel sad and depressed. You might feel flat and tired, and find yourself crying at odd times. This is a normal part of grieving. If sadness and depression last for too long, or become totally overwhelming, you should see a professional counsellor or a doctor who can help you deal with this.
- At some stage you will start to accept the reality of the situation. It is easier to reach acceptance of your situation if you are able to develop a real understanding of why your parents separated, and can begin to see some good things happening for the family.
- Don't be surprised if you sometimes find yourself 'forgetting' that it's happened and carrying on as normal, having some fun, especially with friends. It's OK to go on having fun even when there are bad times.

### **Surviving**

- It is important to remember that the breakdown is not your fault. Your parents' separation or divorce is an adult decision!
- You might think of ways to try to get your parents back together - but that is up to them. Just as you are not to blame for the separation, you also can't keep them together.
- Remember that sometimes things are better off for a family when parents decide to separate.
- Even though your parents may be separating, they are still your Mum and Dad and always will be. Try to stay in contact with both parents (unless one parent is likely to harm you).
- Likewise, your relatives will always be your relatives. Try to stay in contact with them if you can. Contact could be a visit, a phone call or sending a note now and then.
- There are times when the parent who leaves cuts off all contact with the family. This is really hard to deal with.
  - Some people react by pretending they don't care or that they hate that parent.
  - In reality a person could feel really sad, angry or rejected inside.
  - It's important to get some support. Talk about your feelings to your parent, or a close family member or a counsellor.

- Some parents might criticise their ex-partner. It can make you feel really uncomfortable - you could try telling them that it upsets you when they say unkind things about the other person, because they are still your Mum or Dad, and you still care about them.
- Sometimes Mums and Dads can try to get information about their ex-partner by asking you questions about them, or use you as a messenger. This can put you in an awkward position.
  - It could be helpful to explain that you don't want to be the middle person.
  - You could also add that you wouldn't answer the same question if their ex-partner asked it about them either.
- Realise that it's normal to have strong emotions and reactions. It's also normal to feel bad if they are fighting.
- Keep an eye on your brothers and sisters - they may need help. They might be good at supporting you too.
- If you're not sure what is going on and feel that you need more information, can you talk to your parents and ask them what is going on? If you feel uncomfortable about doing this, is there an aunt or uncle, or someone close who is aware of the situation and could help?
- It's important to have an outlet for your feelings and to find emotional support. There are a lot of changes to deal with right now. Some of these might be a new home, a new step-parent (see Step-families) or a new school. Ask for support from your parents, brothers, sisters, relatives, friends or a counsellor.

**Bec says:**

“So many kids nowadays know what it’s like to go through the trauma of their parents' divorce. You probably have a lot of friends who know all about it. Talking to a close friend can help but not everyone’s experience or circumstances are the same. Don’t get hung up on thinking that all the worst things will happen because they happened to someone else. Keep yourself safe by being careful who you talk to, or you could find your confidential stuff being discussed by people who do not have your best interests at heart. It probably seems like the end of your world right now but you will start to feel better and be able to get on with your life”.