

Changing roles as parents

From the child's point of view and from that of parents, the new family after separation differs from what it was before. Obviously the format of the new family has changed, but so must the way it now operates.

Roles and rules change – and need to change – after separation.

This needs careful thought, particularly if children are to be given clear guidelines. See the section on [children](#).

The pre-separation pattern of parenting is replaced by the day-to-day responsibility of a single adult. If the marriage has been a deeply unhappy one, there can be a sense of relief. The change can be positive despite financial hardships. More often, single parenthood is very difficult.

Coping without practical or emotional support from the other parent can be overwhelming.

Problems can include:

- carrying the major burden for the children's welfare and schooling;
- fitting in time for employment or for finding employment;
- discriminatory attitudes towards single parenting (especially towards mothers);
- social change, such as going to social activities alone; and
- emotional consequences such as loneliness, coping with feelings about separation, anxiety about the future or jealousy if your spouse has a new partner.

Most people do adapt as they learn strategies and skills for handling family life on their own.

Most are helped immensely by practical and emotional support from other adults such as relatives or friends. Having a cooperative relationship with your ex-spouse can also be of great help.

Establishing connections with other single parents for practical and emotional support is probably the most helpful way of adjusting. It can help you find out what is "normal". There are often support groups, through churches or community centres, to enable this to happen.

The parent who usually lives apart from the children has to contend with the loss of daily intimacy with his or her children. They feel out of touch with their routines. There is also the fear that the relationship will fade.

Research in both the UK and the USA indicates that 50 per cent of divorced fathers who do not live with their children lose contact within two years of the divorce. It is a horrifying statistic.

Behind these findings lies the importance for parents to commit time, energy and patience in maintaining their relationships with their children.

Parents who are committed normally find that their relationships remain as good as before the separation. Some even find them improved.

Other studies have shown that the quality of the relationship after separation does not depend on the quality of the relationship beforehand. For example, fathers who have had distant relationships with their sons may find this changed afterwards. The same can also be true in reverse, so it is important to be careful as well as committed.

All relationships will be different afterwards, affected by a number of factors:

- the amount of cooperation between parents helping contact to happen;
- the forbearance needed to overcome children's resentment;
- the children's and your own pain on partings and reunions;
- whether the children are encouraged to persist with the relationship;
- whether new partners help to build relationships; and
- how much time and energy is devoted to this by both parents.