

Separation and Divorce

Year: 3/4

Curriculum: PSHE

Topic: Relationships and Family

PA Codes: H23 R5 R6 R7 R9 R 34 L2

Not Eligible for Opt Out ▾

Learning objectives

- To understand that the features of positive family life can be impacted by separation and divorce but that family can still be there for each other in times of difficulty;
- To recognise that despite separation, different family compositions can still provide children with love, security and stability;
- To recognise when and why family relationships are making them feel unhappy, to know that they have rights and to consider how to access help and advice.

What should pupils already know

- about different types of families including those that may be different to their own;
- That there are a variety of trusted adults within the family and at school to whom they can turn for help when they are experiencing separation or divorce of close family members.

Tackling Separation and Divorce in Your Classroom

The statutory RSHE guidance does not specifically refer to “divorce”, although there are references to children’s rights, home circumstances and family breakdown. Much of the focus of the guidance is on forming healthy relationships, but there is nothing on what ‘healthy’ might look like in the context of parental separation. The parents of approximately 280,000 children separate each year, and around 3.5 million children now live in families where the parents are no longer together.

LifeWise has been working with Dr Jan Ewing, a Research Fellow at the University of Exeter, and two leading charities working with separated families, the National Association of Child Contact Centres (NACCC) and the National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS). Jan Ewing argues that statistics like the ones above make it clear that teaching children about their rights when parents separate is crucial. “Too often, children don’t have a voice in the separation process. And actually, children cope better when they are consulted about arrangements for them,” she says. “This is where PSHE can come in: normalising the range of emotions that children might feel at this time, outlining the support available to them and equipping children with

knowledge of their rights under Article 12 of the UNCRC when parents separate, ensures they feel more confident in making their voice heard, leading to mental health and wellbeing benefits for these children. Explicitly teaching children about their rights when parents separate would be a massive step forward. More and more young people have parents who have separated, more live in blended families."

Research by Jan Ewing and her colleague Professor Anne Barlow, funded by the Wellcome Centre for Cultures and Environments of Health ('The HearT Project'), found that while there is a strong appetite for teaching - in primary and secondary schools - about children's rights and the support available to children if parents separate, up until now there has been an absence of appropriate resources. The issue is incredibly sensitive, and while many teachers are already skilled at handling difficult topics, when it comes to parental separation, there is an observed "gap in teaching". These lessons intend to address this gap and the changes in teaching resources required.

Introduction

The topic of separation of parents or carers, either through their relationship breakdown or through a divorce, is sensitive; however, there are many ways to make this less painful. Sharing a class reader is one way - Mum and Dad Glue is the one suggested to broach the topic. [Click here](#). LifeWise has also partnered with academics at the University of Exeter to create the characters of Poppy and Joe, through whom children can explore the impact of separation or divorce. They are used in videos and resources throughout the suite of lessons.

One important factor to note is the personal circumstances of the pupils in your class - this lesson could be delivered in smaller groups and could target those experiencing separation. There's a delicate balance between presenting factual, supportive information and providing empathetic support. Children invariably feel it's their fault, that somehow they can fix things - reiterate that it is never their fault or responsibility. And let them know that they can talk about feelings in the lesson or that there will be an opportunity immediately after - explain that it's okay to be sad, confused or angry. Research shows that some children whose parents separate do better if they get good support from friends, family and professionals and are given a voice in the decisions that need to be made. Explain that these discussions and activities are aimed at empowering children.

Scenario or Dilemma

Poppy heard her Mum and Dad arguing on the phone when she was in her room, and this made her feel sad. What could Poppy do?

Answer: Poppy could explain to her Mum and Dad that it makes her feel sad when they are unkind to each other and ask them to be nicer. If she is still feeling sad, she could talk to a teacher or friend.

Answer: There are lots of organisations that support children when parents separate, such as the National Association of Child Contact Centres, which has lots of helpful information on its website.

Teachers refer back to the options for accessing help. Teachers should have details of ChildLine, NACCC and NYAS to share with children if needed.

Development

The grief cycle of separation starts with a video entitled 'Split' from a documentary showing the effects of separation and divorce on children. It has twelve brave and quite wise children speaking honestly about how it felt when their parents split. They reveal different stages of the grief cycle: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance. Explain the grief cycle - often described as a response to losing someone very close.

There can be common stages, but it is a unique journey. For children experiencing their parent's divorce, the grief cycle could have begun before they knew of the separation or divorce. As children move through grief, there's no standard process or clear timeline, and some children may openly express grief while others may internalise it.

Activity 1	Activity 2	Activity 3
The Grief Cycle of Separation	Lyrics to Music	The Suitcase Kid
Pupils will watch the video and then talk about The Grief Cycle of Separation. Use the questions in the worksheet to structure your session.	Pupils can use the lyrics on the worksheet as inspiration to create a rhythm or melody. An excellent opportunity to express their feelings through music. The worksheet is in Teacher's Notes.	Pupils will read the book, The Suitcase Kid, as a class and then complete the book review. You can find the book review template to accompany this challenge in the Teacher's Notes.

The Suitcase Kid

Book Synopsis: Very upset at her parents' divorce, Andy cannot decide who she wants to live with. She spends one week at Mum's house and the next at Dad's but never really feels that she belongs anywhere.

As an independent reader, the book has an advisory of 9+ as a reading age; the character of Andy in the book is a ten-year-old, but there are younger characters, Zen and Crystal and Radish is the toy rabbit to whom Andy 'speaks'. The sensitive topic highlights the implications of separation and divorce, shows how situations can be resolved and is therefore suitable for a class reader.

Plenary

Explicitly reiterate that when relationships break up, it is painful, but it is never the fault or responsibility of the child or children and that a newly shaped family is possible.

Key vocabulary

divorce, separation, denial, acceptance

Next steps

- To understand children's rights in divorce

Supporting resources

You may find these resources helpful when preparing for the lesson, especially if this isn't a topic you know very well.

- [Helping Your Child Cope with Your Divorce or Separation | NSPCC](#)