

Children's Rights When Parents Separate or Divorce

Year: 5/6

Curriculum: PSHE

Topic: Relationships and Family

PA Codes: R5 R7 R8 L2 L3 L4

Not Eligible for Opt Out ▾

Learning objectives

- To know that when family relationships are making them unhappy due to divorce and separation, there are ways to seek help and support;
- To recognise that there are rights to protect them; UNCRC Article 12
- To understand that it does get better, in time.

What should pupils already know

- about marriage and civil partnership;
- To have an understanding that they are legal declarations of commitment made by two adults who love and care for each other, which are intended to be lifelong.

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

Start by explaining that there will be children within your school/class who have experienced this. Research has found that children who are encouraged to talk and have positive experiences of child-inclusive mediation after parental separation cope better. The difficult feelings around divorce and separation are compounded by the complicated laws and terminology around the process.

Explain that this lesson intends to equip them with an understanding of the terminology, inform them of their rights within the process, and advise them where to get support to help them see a brighter future. The video illustrates that children have perspectives and needs that are better expressed. (Please be aware of other LifeWise lessons that could be used in support - sessions on being assertive, managing difficult emotions, and identifying and talking to trusted adults.)

Scenario or Dilemma

Ava has heard her Mother and Grandmother talking about going to family court. She has been worrying that this means that someone has done something wrong because you only go to court if you are in trouble. Is she right? How can Poppy help Ava after all she has been through? What do you think Poppy might say to Ava to help explain what the judge at the family court does?

Development

Watch the Poppy video. There are many supportive and informative articles to guide parents who are separating, offering ways to ensure that children have a voice and are involved and considered, but this is the first resource for primary-age children that helps to outline the process and to alleviate worries. Children need to know their rights. They have a voice, and it must be listened to. Refer to Lesson on British Values - Lawmakers and Activists (Part 2), which references Article 12 of UNCRRC.

If parents cannot reach an agreement easily, there are three ways for professionals to be involved and to help: through contact arrangements, family mediation and child arrangement orders. The video and the following question and answer slides explain these.

Activity 1	Activity 2	Activity 3
Poppy's Story	Difficult Vocabulary Challenge	Black Box Questions
<p>Pupils will discuss the feelings and experiences that Poppy went through with a partner. Pupils will use the questions and picture prompts to help to structure their discussion. It may also be useful to print The Grief Cycle to help with the discussion.</p> <p>You can find worksheets in the Teacher's Notes.</p>	<p>Pupils will explore the new vocabulary discussed and introduced in the lesson. Pupils will cut and paste the definitions to match each word.</p> <p>You can find worksheets to accompany this challenge in the Teacher's Notes.</p>	<p>Allow pupils to anonymously submit questions about separation and their rights on paper.</p> <p>Teachers can refer to Safeguarding leads or SLT to be able to handle any more difficult questions - but others can be genuinely responded to within a class discussion setting.</p>

Plenary

Although the make-up of families can change, it is possible to have safe and loving relationships with both parents. 'Rehearse' ways that children can ask parents and carers to show that they care for them.

Key vocabulary

contact centre, mediation, child inclusive mediation, Cafcass, family court, judge, children's rights, United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

Next steps

- To understand how to respond safely and appropriately to adults they may encounter (in all contexts including online) whom they do not know;
- To understand what can affect well-being and resilience, e.g. life changes, relationships;
- To develop strategies to understand and build resilience as well as how to respond to disappointment and setbacks.

Supporting resources

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

- [8 Rights Every Child Deserves After a Divorce | OurFamilyWizard](#)
- [Helping Your Child Cope with Your Divorce or Separation | NSPCC](#)
- [UNICEF - Children's Rights](#)