

## Dealing With When Parents Separate or Divorce

Year: 5/6

Curriculum: PSHE

Topic: Relationships and Family

PA Codes: H17 H20 H23 R5 R6 R7 R9 R 34 L2

Not Eligible for Opt Out ▾

### Learning objectives

- To understand that feelings that are triggered by separation or divorce can change over time and range in intensity;
- To develop strategies to respond to feelings, including intense or conflicting feelings; how to manage and respond to feelings appropriately and proportionately in situations around separation and divorce.

### What should pupils already know

- 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 them 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.

### 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. Using the experiences of others is one way to start this topic with empathy: James TW wrote a song that features in the lesson after learning that the parents of a student he taught were getting divorced.

"The first thing I thought was how are they going to explain it to him in a positive way and one where he would understand. I wanted there to be a song that he could listen to which would make him feel better about everything that was going on."

There's a delicate balance between presenting factual, supportive information and providing empathetic support. The estimated divorce rate in the UK is 45 per cent.

## Scenario or Dilemma

Meet Poppy! She is aged eight and loves to dance. She has a brother called Joe, who is 12. Poppy's parents separated a year ago, and she was really sad at first, but she feels much happier about the situation now.

Poppy's friend Sam has just learned that his parents intend to separate. Sam is feeling sad and confused. How can Poppy help Sam? What do you think Poppy might say to Sam to help, given that her parents separated a year ago?

## Development

Everyone disagrees sometimes. But when parents or carers argue, it can create worries that they might split up permanently. Adults can get a divorce or split up for lots of reasons. Parents fighting doesn't mean they will break up. But anyone worried can find lots of help from professionals and people who have experienced separation.

There are some things to remember:

- It is never the fault of a child;
- It can take time to adjust to things;
- There are lots of reasons why people divorce or separate;
- There are so many places, in person or online, where children can talk and get help.
- Talking to parents is a start, but so is talking to the mediator (if the parents go to mediation) or the Family Court Adviser if the parents go to court. More information about this is available in the challenges and in the second lesson. It can be hard for children to say how they feel, especially if it means disagreeing with one or both parents as they don't want to feel they're taking sides.
- Everyone has the right to say how they feel and ask for what they need.

Activity 1	Activity 2	Activity 3
<b>Poppy's Feelings</b>	<b>Who Can Help?</b>	<b>Being Assertive</b>
<p>Pupils will watch the video about Poppy and Joe's experience when their parents separated.</p> <p>The pupils will think about how Poppy might have felt when her parent first separated. Using the grief cycle; the pupils will draw the emotion on Poppy's face and write down how she might feel for each process.</p>	<p>Using the accompanying worksheet, the pupils will learn more about the organisations available to help when parents are separating.</p> <p>The pupils can then discuss the advantages and disadvantages of speaking to different people or organisations.</p>	<p>In this role play, the pupils explore what being assertive means and how being assertive is positive.</p> <p>They discover that being assertive enables you to recognise your own rights whilst respecting the rights of others.</p>

## 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. So much support is available for children, and there are still rights to protect them.

## Key vocabulary

assertive, divorce, separation, contact centre, Family Court Advisor

## 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](#)