Fathers Voice

PARENTING APART

Parenting Apart

Boundaries, separation and parenting after separation

Written by a father, for fathers.
Lived experience, peer support and practical guidance for England and Wales. Not legal advice.

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Urgent checklist

Use the parts that fit your situation. If anyone is in immediate danger, call 999.

1 **Pause**

Before you reply to anything that has upset you, stop. Draft it, leave it, and send a shorter, calmer version later or not at all. Ask yourself whether you would be comfortable with a judge reading it.

2 **Keep a record**

Start a short, dated log of what was arranged and what happened. Save messages. Don't edit, crop or delete them.

3

Protect your children

Keep adult conflict, adult messages and adult paperwork away from your children. Don't ask them to carry messages or report back on the other home.

4

Pick one channel

Move parenting communication to one written channel, such as WhatsApp, text or email. Keep it about the children.

5

Get the right help

Safety: If you're being threatened, followed or harassed, or you fear for your children, contact the police and get legal advice.

Court papers: If you receive an application or a hearing date, read everything and note every deadline.

Money: Don't stop maintenance because of a dispute about time with your children.

6

Look after yourself

Talk to someone today: a friend, your GP, a peer group or a helpline. If you're struggling to cope, call NHS 111 and choose the mental health option. It's free, at any time.

Introduction

Most fathers don't notice the moment a separation stops being about the relationship and starts being about everything else. The relationship ends, and you think that's the hard part. Then come the messages. The changed handover times. The comments about your parenting. The questions from your children that you don't know how to answer. The relatives with opinions. The money. The sense that, even though you no longer live together, the other person still has a hand on the controls of your week.

> FROM PEER SUPPORT
>
> *I know that feeling from my own separation, and from the fathers I have since sat alongside as a peer supporter. This guide carries pieces of those experiences. It isn't the story of one family. It's a pattern that keeps repeating: the relationship ends, but the conflict doesn't, and a father has to decide what kind of parent and what kind of man he is going to be inside it.*

You may feel angry, relieved, ashamed, lonely, numb or all of those before lunch. You may still love the person you have separated from, or you may never want to speak to them again. You may believe you're being pushed out, or you may simply be worn down by an arrangement that keeps shifting. None of this makes you a worse father. It means something that held your life together has broken, and you're trying to stand up on new ground.

How this guide is organised

The early chapters look at what happens to people, and to communication, when a relationship ends badly. The middle chapters are about boundaries: what they are, why they're hard and how to hold them. Then the guide turns to your children and the practical business of parenting from two homes. The final chapters are about you: breaking old patterns, looking after yourself and building a life after separation.

Each chapter ends with three things to remember and a few questions to think about. You don't have to write the answers down, but many fathers find it helps.

Why this guide avoids labels

After a painful separation it's tempting to reach for a word that explains the other person, like toxic, controlling or unstable. This guide doesn't use them about the other parent, for three reasons.

Labels aren't evidence. A judge, a Cafcass officer or a social worker won't be moved by what you call the other parent. They will be moved by what happened, when, and how it affected your child.

Labels harden you. Once you have decided someone is a type, every message reads as proof. You stop noticing when they get it right, and you can't cooperate on the days when cooperation is possible.

Your children are half of that other person. If they hear you describe their mother in those terms, or sense it in how you talk, it lands on them too.

Words like narcissist or borderline sound more official, but they're clinical diagnoses. Only a qualified professional can give one, after a proper assessment, so a label from you will be heard as an opinion, and it can look like you're stuck in the conflict.

So the guide describes what happens instead. "Handovers keep being cancelled at short notice" is something you can record, plan around and respond to. "They're toxic" isn't. If you're worried about the other parent's mental health, describe what you've seen and raise it with Cafcass, the social worker or your solicitor.

Domestic abuse and men

Most difficult separations aren't abusive. They're two people under pressure, handling it badly some of the time. But some are, and men often find it hard to recognise.

Abuse isn't only violence. It can be control, humiliation, threats, being cut off from your children, or being told nobody will believe you. Many men don't see it as abuse because it doesn't match what they expect. Some feel embarrassed. Others worry they won't be believed.

In England and Wales, the Crime Survey estimates that about 2.2 million women and 1.5 million men aged 16 and over experienced domestic abuse in the year ending March 2025.[1] If any of this sounds familiar, you aren't alone, and there's support for men listed at the back of this guide.

The guide is written for both situations. It covers recognising abuse, recording it and protecting yourself and your children, and it tries to be clear about which advice applies where.

CHAPTER 1

When the relationship ends but the conflict doesn't

IN SHORT

1. A handful of patterns cover most of what makes separation feel harder than it should.
2. Controlling behaviour, harassment and stalking can be crimes, and men can be victims of them too.
3. Co-parenting and parallel parenting are both legitimate. Most families move between them over time.

Most separations are painful. Some settle within a year or two into something workable. Others stay tense for much longer, with every handover, message and school event carrying the weight of what went before. Some of what drove the relationship into trouble keeps going after it ends. Sometimes new patterns start for the first time once contact is reduced to messages and handovers.

There's no neat line between an ordinary difficult separation and a high-conflict one. It's more useful to look at the patterns you're actually living with, how often they happen, and whether they started in the relationship, after it, or both. Chapter 2 covers what sustained conflict does to your own health. This chapter is about recognising its shape.

Conflict, in brief

A few patterns cover most of what makes a separation feel harder than it should, whether they started in the relationship or afterwards. They can show up on either side, and in a stressed separation most people slip into one or two of them at some point. What matters is how often, how intensely, and whether they're used to control.

Control. Decisions about who you see, what you spend or how you parent, with life made difficult when you resist.

Blame and guilt. Every difficulty becomes your fault, or you're made to feel responsible for the other person's distress if you won't give way.

Disputed memory. What was said or agreed keeps being challenged, until you start to doubt yourself. Keeping written records is the answer to that one.

Children pulled in. Messages passed through them, criticism of you in front of them, or their time with you used as leverage.

Persistence. Repeated calls or messages that aren't about the children, turning up unannounced, monitoring, following or threats.

Noticing these isn't about building a case against the other parent. It helps you understand why you feel the way you do, and why ordinary advice like "just talk to each other" may not work for you yet.

When it becomes abuse

For most dads, the patterns above are as far as it goes. They're hard to live with, but they're conflict, not abuse.

For some, it goes further. Abuse isn't only being hit. In England and Wales it also covers controlling or coercive behaviour, and emotional, psychological and economic abuse. It can carry on after you separate. Controlling or coercive behaviour in an intimate or family relationship is a criminal offence. [3]

In everyday terms, it can look like this:

- You watch what you say and do, because you're worried about the reaction.
- Your money, your phone or who you see is checked or controlled.
- You're put down, threatened or blamed until you start to doubt yourself.
- Time with your children is used to make you do what's wanted.

Lots of men don't call it abuse. You might have told yourself it was "just rows", that you should be able to handle it, or that it doesn't happen to men. It does. About 1.5 million men in England and Wales experienced domestic abuse in a single year. [1]

If any of that sounds like your life, talk to the ManKind Initiative or the Men's Advice Line. You don't need to be sure it's abuse before you call. They will listen without judgement.

PRACTICAL TEST

Is the behaviour occasional and linked to a specific stress, or is it a repeated pattern that makes you afraid or controls what you do? The first is conflict. The second needs specialist advice.

Co-parenting and parallel parenting

Two broad approaches exist for parenting after separation, and knowing both helps you stop measuring yourself against the wrong one.

Co-parenting is the ideal you will read about in most places: two parents talking easily, agreeing rules together, sitting side by side at parents' evening. Some separated parents manage that, and if you can, it's worth protecting.

Many can't, at least not yet, and that isn't a failure. For them, a more realistic aim is parallel parenting. Each parent runs their own home in their own way, contact is kept short, written and

focused on the children, and you cooperate on specific things when it's safe and possible. It exists because close cooperation, attempted too soon or with too little trust, tends to create more conflict for children to witness, not less.

Over time, many families move between the two. A calm period can look like co-parenting. A difficult patch can need firm parallel lines again. Chapter 9 covers both in detail and how to tell which one fits where you're now.

Boundaries are what make either approach possible. They aren't walls to punish the other parent. They're the structure that lets two people who no longer trust each other still give their children a stable childhood, which is what the rest of this guide is about.

OVER TO YOU

You don't have to write the answers down, but many fathers find it helps.

1. Which of these patterns do you recognise, in the relationship, after it, or in your own behaviour?
2. Who could you talk to if you needed to check whether what you're experiencing is abuse?
3. Does co-parenting or parallel parenting fit where you're right now?

CHAPTER 2

Separation grief and how it shows up in men

IN SHORT

1. Separation is a loss, and grief in men often looks like anger, work or withdrawal.
2. You will move back and forth between stages. That's normal.
3. Get help early if low mood or anxiety is affecting your daily life.

Separation is a loss. Even if you wanted it, you have lost a version of your future, your daily life with your children, often your home and sometimes friends and family who took sides. It's normal to grieve that.

Many men don't recognise grief in themselves because it doesn't look like crying. It looks like working late, drinking more, going to the gym twice a day, picking fights, refusing to talk about it or feeling nothing at all.

Post-separation trauma is real

For some people, the effects of a painful relationship and separation last well beyond the paperwork. You might find yourself replaying arguments, being startled by your phone, sleeping badly, avoiding places linked to the relationship or feeling on edge for months. If that sounds familiar, speak to your GP. NHS Talking Therapies accept self-referrals in most areas, and these reactions often respond well to the right support.

If conflict with the other parent is still ongoing rather than settling, it takes its own toll, one that many men underestimate: headaches, tight shoulders, raised blood pressure, getting ill more often, and less patience left over for your children when you're stretched thin. None of this means you're weak. It means you have been under sustained pressure, and recognising it is the first step to dealing with it.

The stages you may move through

Grief doesn't follow a timetable, and you will probably move back and forth. It can still help to recognise where you are.

Denial. Shock, going through the motions, throwing yourself into work or your social life so you don't have to think about it. It buys you time, but it can't last.

Anger. At the other parent, at yourself, at the whole situation. That's normal. What matters is where you put it. Exercise, a long walk or talking it through with someone you trust are safer outlets than a message sent at midnight.

Bargaining. Promising to change, trying to reunite, rehearsing what you should have done differently. Try to bring your focus back to what you can control now.

Low mood. Sadness, hopelessness, tiredness. Be patient with yourself, keep your basic routines going and ask for help if it doesn't lift.

Acceptance. Recognising that the relationship is over and the future will look different. Not happy, necessarily. Just steadier.

Forgiveness. Letting go of the need to keep fighting the past. That's for your benefit, not the other parent's. Chapter 13 comes back to this.

Moving on. Building a life that's yours, with your children at the centre of it.

What helps

A few things help, even if they feel small at the time.

Start by naming what you're feeling, even if only to yourself. Keep your body going: sleep, regular meals, movement, less alcohol.

Spend time with people who steady you, not people who wind you up. Talk to someone who has been through it. Peer groups for separated fathers exist for exactly this.

If low mood, panic or intrusive thoughts start affecting your daily life, get professional help. Don't wait it out.

If you ever feel that you can't go on, call NHS 111 and choose the mental health option, or CALM on 0800 58 58 58 (5pm to mid-night). You don't have to be at crisis point to call.

OVER TO YOU

You don't have to write the answers down, but many fathers find it helps.

1. Where do you think you're in the stages of grief right now?
2. How has your grief been showing up in your behaviour?
3. Who is one person you could be honest with this week?

CHAPTER 3

What boundaries are and what they are not

IN SHORT

1. A boundary is about what you will do, not what the other parent must do.
2. Good boundaries reduce conflict, protect your energy and model respect for your children.
3. Check every boundary: does it protect, or does it punish?

A boundary is a clear decision about what you will and won't accept, and what you will do if it's crossed. It protects your time, your energy, your wellbeing and, most importantly, your children's stability.

Why this is harder for men to hear than it should be

Plenty of men come into fatherhood after separation having learned, without anyone saying it outright, that being a good man means not making a fuss. You provide. You keep the peace. You absorb what comes at you rather than push back. None of that makes you weak. It's just what you were taught good looks like, often from a long way back.

That training works against you now. A father who never says no ends up pulled in every direction, by work, family and even his own children as they get older. Not because he's a soft touch, but because he never drew a line anyone could see. Over time it costs you your sleep, your patience and the steady version of yourself your children actually need, not an endlessly accommodating one.

A boundary isn't the opposite of being a good father. It's one of the ways you prove you're one.

Boundaries are not about controlling the other parent

Boundaries are often misunderstood. They aren't a way to control the other parent. Cafcass puts it simply: you can't control how the other parent behaves, but you can choose not to match it.[15]

A boundary is about your own behaviour: what you will do, what you will respond to, and how. A demand only works if the other parent changes. A boundary works whatever they do.

	A demand	A boundary
Late-night messages	"You need to stop messaging me late at night."	"I'll reply to messages about the children between 8am and 8pm. If something's urgent, please call."
Handovers	"Don't start on me at handovers."	"I'll keep handovers short and friendly. Anything we need to sort out, I'll pick up by message that evening."
Going over the past	"Stop bringing up our relationship."	"I'll always reply about the children. I won't reply to messages about us."
Last-minute changes	"You can't keep changing plans on me."	"I can usually swap with a few days' notice. On the day, I'll stick to what we agreed."

Notice that every boundary is something you can keep on your own, without anyone's agreement. That's what makes it hold.

Then the hard part is keeping it calmly. When a message tests a boundary, reply briefly, stick to the facts about the children and don't rise to the rest. Chapter 5 shows how.

What your boundaries say about you

Your boundaries show what you value. A dad who keeps handovers calm, won't argue in front of the children and turns up when he says he will is telling everyone, including himself, what kind of father he is.

They also protect your sense of your own worth. After a separation, it's easy to feel your needs don't matter, or that keeping the peace means always giving way. Each boundary you keep, even a small one, is a reminder that your time, your home and your wellbeing count too.

That doesn't mean your worth depends on getting it right. You will give in sometimes, and things won't always go the way you hoped. That doesn't make you less of a man or less of a father. Your worth doesn't depend on anyone else. Boundaries are just one way you look after it.

What a boundary actually buys you

In practice, every boundary you keep does at least one of these jobs:

- **Less anxiety.** You know how and when contact will happen, so there's less to dread.
- **Less conflict.** Fewer grey areas means less to argue over.
- **More energy.** The time you would have spent on every message goes to your children, your work and your own recovery.

- **Safety.** Where there has been abuse, a clear boundary isn't just about comfort. It keeps you and your children safer.

Calm, predictable limits also make things easier for everyone over time, because everyone knows where they stand.

And your children are watching. They learn what respect looks like, and how to treat themselves, from what they see you do, not from what anyone tells them. A father who holds a calm boundary is teaching them they're allowed to as well.

Types of boundary you may need

Most dads need boundaries in a few areas at once. You don't need all of these. Pick the ones that would make the biggest dif-

ference this month.

Area	What it covers	An example
Communication	Which channel, what topics, when you reply	"I'll use WhatsApp for anything about the children, and reply within a day."
Time	Handover times, notice for changes	"I need a few days' notice to swap a weekend."
Your home	Where handovers happen, who comes in	"Handovers happen at the door. I'd rather keep my home private."
Emotional	Not going over the relationship, keeping things about the children	"I'm not going to discuss what went wrong between us. I'm happy to talk about the children."
Digital	Social media, shared accounts, passwords, location sharing	Change shared passwords, stop sharing your location, and don't post about the separation.
Money	Accounts, maintenance, informal loans	Separate bank accounts, maintenance set up formally, and no lending money "just this once".
The children	Keeping them out of adult matters	"I won't discuss arrangements or money in front of the children."

Healthy and unhealthy boundaries

A healthy boundary is clear, consistent and in proportion. It can bend when that genuinely helps your children. Unhealthy boundaries go wrong in one of two directions.

BOUNDARIES CAN GO WRONG IN TWO DIRECTIONS

Too loose

Yes to everything, at any hour.

Healthy

Clear and consistent, and able to bend when it helps your children.

Too rigid

No to every change, on principle.

The aim is the middle: firm enough to rely on, flexible enough to help your children.

	Too loose	Healthy	Too rigid
What it looks like	You say yes to everything, reply at any hour and change plans whenever asked.	Clear, kept most of the time, flexible when it helps the children.	You refuse every change on principle, because giving any ground feels like losing.
A swap request	"Yes, fine," every time, then you're quietly furious.	"I can't this weekend, but I could do next Saturday instead."	"No. I don't do swaps."
How it ends	Resentment, and no time of your own.	Fewer arguments, and a routine the children can rely on.	More conflict, and your children caught in the middle.

If you have a court order, keeping to it isn't being rigid. It's what you're both meant to do. A one-off swap is fine when you both agree to it, in writing. If the arrangement itself needs to change, that's done by agreement or by going back to court, not by one parent deciding.

One question helps with any boundary: does this protect my children and my wellbeing, or does it mainly punish the other parent? If it's the second, it will usually backfire.

Sometimes a boundary gets tested through the children, like plans booked on your time that they already know about. Chapter 6, When boundaries are pushed, covers how to handle that without the children losing out.

If your confidence is low after the relationship, you don't need to fix that before you start. Set one small, clear boundary and keep it. That's enough to begin, and the confidence tends to follow.

OVER TO YOU

You don't have to write the answers down, but many fathers find it helps.

1. Which type of boundary do you most need right now?
2. Are your boundaries currently too loose, too rigid or about right?
3. What's one small boundary you could set and keep this week?

CHAPTER 4

Boundaries start with you

IN SHORT

1. Internal boundaries are promises you keep with yourself. They make every other boundary easier.
2. People-pleasing gives away what you need to avoid disapproval. Cooperation looks for solutions that work for everyone.
3. Pause before you answer, keep your no short, and expect it to feel uncomfortable at first.

Knowing what a boundary is and actually keeping one are very different things. Most fathers find the second much harder than they expect, and it usually starts with the rules you keep about your own thoughts, reactions and habits, before it ever reaches the other parent.

What internal boundaries look like

Internal boundaries are small promises you make to yourself. They're quieter than external ones, but they hold everything else up. For example:

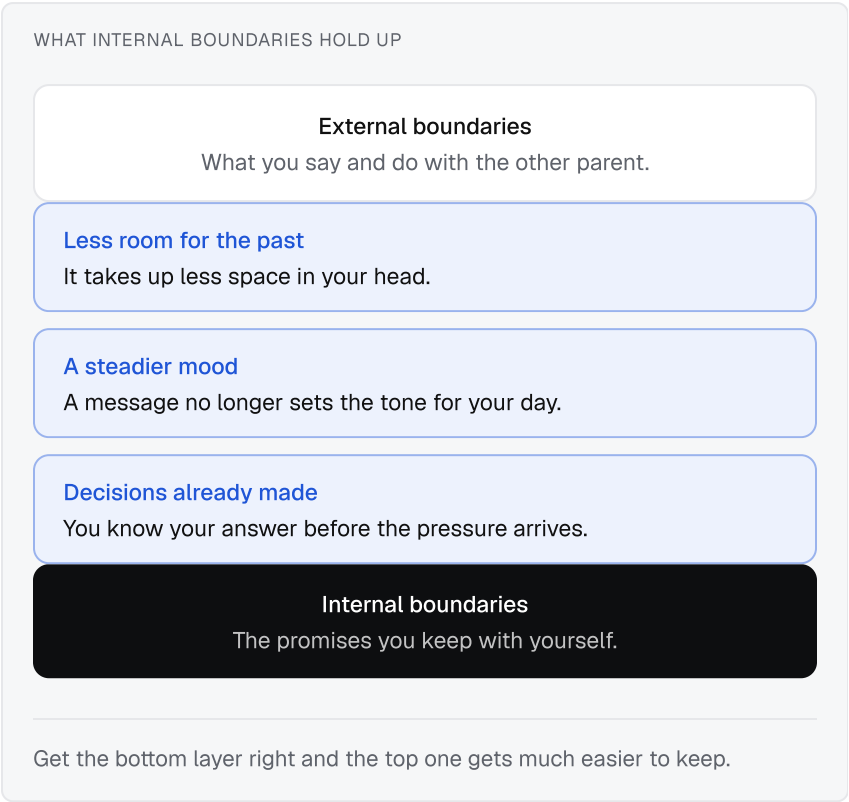
SMALL PROMISES TO YOURSELF

When I'm angry	I wait before I reply.
Their social media	Isn't mine to check.
Old arguments	Can stay in the past. If I catch myself replaying one at night, I get up and do something else.
Blame that isn't mine	Is something I can put down.
Before a handover	I take a moment to settle myself first.

You won't keep every one, every time. Pick one or two that would help most and start there, and write them somewhere you will see them.

When you need to let something out, write it down and save it, then take the feeling somewhere else: a friend, a run, a journal. It still gets a place. It just isn't the other parent's inbox.

Here's what they do for you.



Looking after your own corner

Three more promises are worth making, because they protect all the others.

Protect time for yourself. Keep some time each week that's just for your health and wellbeing, and don't give it up without good reason. A run, a swim, football, time with a friend. It isn't a luxury. It's how you stay well enough to be the father your children need.

Choose who gets your time. Limit contact with people who stir up conflict, whether that's relatives who take sides or friends who encourage you to escalate. That isn't about cutting people off in anger. It's about choosing who gets your attention. Looking after yourself covers building the support that goes alongside this.

Allow yourself to change. Use this period to work out who you are now, not just who you were in the relationship. Many fathers find that, once the worst has passed, separation becomes a chance to rediscover interests, friendships and parts of themselves they had set aside.

Breaking old patterns

Most of us carry habits from the relationship, and from much earlier: always smoothing things over, always apologising first, quick to react and slow to let go. They're hard to break because they're familiar, even when they aren't working.

Separation brings out the worst in most people at some point too. If you have sent messages you regret or raised your voice at a handover, owning that isn't weakness. It's useful to your children and to any future court case. If you're worried your own behaviour is frightening anyone, the Respect Phoneline offers confidential, judgement-free help.

Expect to slip either way. Notice the trigger, decide in advance what you will do instead, and treat holding a boundary once as real progress, not the finish line.

Why it feels hard

Many fathers come out of a difficult relationship having spent years keeping the peace: saying yes to avoid a row, apologising first, giving way on things that mattered. That habit doesn't disappear when the relationship ends.

It has a name: people-pleasing. It means regularly putting other people's wishes ahead of your own needs, mainly to avoid disapproval or conflict. It's different from cooperation, which looks for solutions that work for everyone.

You might recognise some of the signs. Finding it very hard to say no. Apologising when you have done nothing wrong. Feeling responsible for other people's moods. Agreeing to changes you don't want, then feeling resentful.

The roots vary. For some men it goes back to childhood, in a home where love felt conditional or where keeping a parent calm was a way to stay safe. For others it grew in the relationship, as a way to manage someone else's reactions.

Left unchecked, it wears you out and builds resentment that comes out sideways. It also makes arrangements unpredictable for your children, and teaches them that one person's needs always come first.

Learning to say no

Putting yourself first isn't the same as being selfish. It means including your needs alongside everyone else's. Start by noticing what you actually want before you answer a request,

then decide.

Four things make it easier: pause before you answer, keep it short, offer another option if you want to, and go easy on "sorry".

SAYING NO, STEP BY STEP

1

Pause

"Let me check and get back to you."

Gives you time to decide properly.

2

Keep it short

"That doesn't work for me this weekend."

A short reason is fine. A long one invites an argument.

3

Offer options

"I can't do Saturday, but Sunday morning works."

Only if you want to.

4

Go easy on sorry

"Sorry, I can't make that."

One sorry is plenty. Often none is needed.

A short, calm no is kinder than a yes you resent.

Self-worth grows from small acts of self-respect, repeated: notice your achievements, however small, spend time with people who value you, keep promises to yourself. When you slip back into old habits, talk to yourself the way you would talk to a friend in the same position.

Holding the line with the other parent

Setting boundaries with someone you will be parenting alongside for years is its own challenge. You can't simply walk away, your children need you both, and every boundary you set will be tested at some point.

Be clear about what you will and won't do, and consistent, so it becomes the normal pattern. Stay flexible on what helps your child and firm on what protects them. And be patient, because a new boundary usually meets resistance before it settles.

A few specific fears usually get in the way:

Fear of the reaction. Anger, a flood of messages, being badmouthed, a threat to stop contact. Most of this is uncomfortable, not dangerous, and it eases as you hold the boundary. A real safety risk is different, and needs records and advice, not just a boundary. If a boundary is costing you contact and not just an argument, Family Court Roadmap covers that in detail.

Guilt. It arrives the moment you say no, especially if you have always been the one who gave way. A reasonable limit held calmly isn't unfair. The guilt is a habit, not a verdict.

Fear of being judged. Consistent boundaries rarely look difficult from the outside, and they usually reduce conflict.

Loneliness and self-doubt. It's easy to accept bad contact because the quiet feels worse, and easy to stop trusting yourself after a long run of criticism. Check your judgement against a friend, not the other parent.

The same skills apply beyond the other parent too: relatives who take sides, friends who want every detail, colleagues who keep asking for extra hours. You're allowed to limit what you share and how much you give.

TRY SAYING

I appreciate you asking. I'd rather not go over the separation, but I'd love to talk about anything else.

Nobody should have to hold all of this alone. Support can come from friends, family, a peer group, a counsellor, your GP or a solicitor, ideally people who help you stay calm rather than ones who encourage you to escalate.

OVER TO YOU

You don't have to write the answers down, but many fathers find it helps.

1. What internal boundary would make the biggest difference to your week?
2. Where do you most often say yes when you mean no, and where do you think that comes from?
3. Who in your life helps you stay calm rather than wind you up?

CHAPTER 5

Communicating with the other parent

IN SHORT

1. Pick one channel for anything about the children, and don't block it.
2. Keep messages brief, informative, friendly and firm, and don't justify, argue, defend or explain.
3. Write every message as if a judge might read it.

How you communicate with the other parent will shape the next few years more than almost anything else. You don't need to be friends. You need to be clear, consistent and calm.

Pick one channel

Most parents use WhatsApp, text or email. Any of them can work. What matters is that you both use the same one for anything about the children, so nothing gets lost and there's

one record.

Channel	Good for	Watch out for
WhatsApp	Quick, everyday arrangements. Easy to export the whole chat with dates and times.	It's easy to fire off a reply. Turn off read receipts if they add pressure.
Text message	Short practical updates, like running ten minutes late.	Harder to save and search, and long messages get messy.
Email	Anything that needs detail, like holiday dates or school decisions.	Slower, so not for same-day changes.
A co-parenting app	Keeping messages, calendars and costs in one place, with a record that's hard to dispute.	Some charge a fee, and you both have to use it.

Co-parenting apps include OurFamilyWizard, AppClose and TalkingParents. Sometimes a court orders parents to use one. If yours has, use it for everything the order covers, and nothing else.

Whichever you choose, don't block the other parent, however hard the messages get. On some apps, blocking can hide or delete the conversation, and you will miss anything sent about the children. Mute the chat if you need a break.

Cafcass points out that texts and messages are easily misread, especially on tricky subjects.[15] For something difficult, and where it's safe, it can work better to ask to talk, agree a time and keep to an agenda. Then confirm what you agreed in writing.

Otherwise, keep phone calls for real emergencies.

Keep it brief, informative, friendly and firm

A well-known approach for difficult exchanges is the BIFF response, developed by Bill Eddy of the High Conflict Institute:

- **Brief:** a few sentences, not paragraphs.
- **Informative:** facts and proposals, not opinions about the other parent.
- **Friendly:** a polite opening and close, even if you don't feel friendly.
- **Firm:** a clear answer or proposal, so the exchange can end.

If a message criticises you and asks a question, answer the question and leave the criticism.

INSTEAD OF

~~"That's rubbish and you know it. You're the one who's always late. Fine, I'll have him Friday but this is the last time"~~

TRY

Thanks for letting me know. I can have Leo from 5pm on Friday instead of Saturday. I'll drop him back at 6pm on Sunday as usual.

Don't justify, argue, defend or explain

BIFF is how to write. JADE is a reminder of what to leave out. It stands for Justify, Argue, Defend, Explain, and the advice is: don't.

When a message criticises you, the pull is to justify what you did, argue the point, defend yourself and explain it all again. Each one gives the other parent something new to reply to, and the exchange grows.

You can give a reason once, briefly. After that, repeat your answer and stop.

INSTEAD OF

~~"I can't swap because I've got work, and you changed things twice last month, and I'm not being difficult, I've always been flexible with you"~~

TRY

I can't swap this weekend. I could do the 14th instead.

Set response times

You don't have to reply straight away. A message that arrives at 11pm can wait until morning. Decide when you will check and respond, for example once each evening, and say so if it helps.

TRY SAYING

I check messages about the children each evening and will reply then. If something is urgent, please call.

Keep it about the children

Parenting messages aren't the place to settle what went wrong between you. If the other parent brings it up, you don't have to answer that part. If you feel you must say something, bring it back to the arrangement.

TRY SAYING

I'd rather keep these messages to arrangements for the children. On Saturday, I'll collect at 10am as planned.

Share the good news too

Messages don't have to be only about problems. Cafcass suggests keeping each other up to date, sharing your child's happy moments and successes, and acknowledging what the other parent does for them.[15] A photo from sports day or "she got her spelling certificate today" builds a bit of goodwill for the harder conversations.

Don't wait to be told things either. Ask how school is going, or what's coming up.

And never ask your child to pass on a message. That's your job, not theirs.[15]

Make it easy to agree

Good communication runs both ways. When the other parent makes a fair point about your child, say so. "That's a fair point about bedtime, I'll keep it to 7.30 at mine too" costs nothing and often lowers the temperature.

Where you can, offer a choice, not a demand: "Would Friday or Sunday work better for the swap?" People are more likely to agree to something they helped choose.

Write as if someone else will read it

If there's ever a court case, your messages may end up in front of a judge or a Cafcass officer. Write every message as though they will read it. It's good discipline even if they never do.

PRACTICAL TEST

Read your message back as if you were a stranger. Does it sound calm, reasonable and focused on the child? If not, rewrite it.

OVER TO YOU

You don't have to write the answers down, but many fathers find it helps.

1. Which channel would work best for you both: WhatsApp, text, email or an app?
2. Look at your last three messages. Would they pass the practical test?
3. What response time can you realistically commit to?

CHAPTER 6

When boundaries are pushed

IN SHORT

1. Restate a boundary once, calmly, then stop.
2. Describe behaviour and its effect on the children, without accusation.
3. Keep a factual record, and get advice when pushback becomes harassment.

Most boundaries get tested at some point. The other parent may ignore them, argue against them or react strongly. How you respond in those moments decides whether the boundary holds.

Spotting the pattern

Pushback often takes a recognisable shape. The patterns below look different, but they work the same way: each one leaves you holding the cost of saying no. Refuse, and you're the one who looks unreasonable, unkind or the one letting your child down.

Naming the pattern makes it easier to stay calm and answer the actual request, not the feeling behind it.

Pattern	What it can sound like
Fait accompli. It's presented as already decided.	"I've booked tickets, he's really looking forward to it. I'll pick him up at 6pm."
Moral leverage. Saying no is made to feel like failing your child.	"A good person wouldn't make this difficult for him."
Guilt. You're made responsible for someone else's distress.	"I don't know what I'll do if you won't help me out."
Tactical empathy. Warmth comes just before a request.	"I know things have been tough for you, so I'm sure you will be fine swapping again."
Time pressure. You're rushed into deciding.	"I need to know right now, I'm outside the school."
Creeping requests. A small yes gets stretched, until the arrangement has changed.	"Since you're picking him up anyway, can you keep him till Sunday too?"
Vagueness. Nothing concrete is agreed, so it can change later.	"We will just sort something out about swaps later."

Spotting a pattern doesn't mean assuming bad intent. A genuine request can look the same. What matters is whether it keeps happening and eroding your boundaries, or whether your answer is respected once you give it.

How to respond

You won't need all of these. Pick the one that fits the pattern in front of you.

Stay calm and repeat

Guilt and moral leverage work by getting you to explain yourself. Every reason you give is something new to argue with, and before long the conversation is about your reasons, not the original request. Say your answer once, calmly, then stop. You don't need to justify it a second time.

"I understand it's a hard week. As I said, I can't change this one."

Answer the point, not the pressure

Tactical empathy puts a kind word right before the request. You can acknowledge the feeling without letting it change your answer.

"I know things have been tough lately. The swap still doesn't work for me this weekend."

Buy time

Time pressure works because a quick answer is more likely to be a yes. A genuine request can usually wait an hour or a day.

"I can't decide right now. I'll confirm by this evening."

Ask for the specific

With vagueness, nothing concrete is agreed. Each of you can walk away remembering it differently, and the goalposts can move later, because there was never anything clear to point back to. Ask for the detail, then confirm it in writing yourself, so you both have the same version.

"What time exactly? I'll text to confirm once we have agreed it."

Reflect back what happened

For a fait accompli or a creeping request, describe what happened plainly, without accusing anyone, and say what was agreed. This is sometimes called the mirror technique.

For a fait accompli:

"You have booked tickets for Saturday and told him about it, and I've only heard today. Saturday is my time with him, so that doesn't work. Let's agree the next one before it's booked."

For a creeping request:

"You asked me to have them on Saturday night, and I said yes. It's now become the Friday school pickup and Sunday evening too. I'm happy to do Saturday night as we agreed. I can't do Friday or Sunday."

Redirect or step away

If things are heating up, especially at a handover, bring it back to the practical point or end it politely, then leave. Walking away from a row isn't losing. It protects your child from seeing one.

"Let's pick this up later. I'll take Jack now and drop him back at 6."

Some messages don't need an answer at all. You can reply only to the practical part, or not reply.

When the children are already involved

Fait accompli is hardest when the children already know. The other parent books a family party or a day out on your time, then asks. Saying no feels like punishing the children. Saying yes teaches that booking first and asking later works.

It helps to separate this one event from the pattern.

1. **Decide about this event on its own**
   Ask yourself whether it really matters to the children. A grandparent's big birthday or a cousin's wedding is different from a routine visit that could happen another day. If it matters to them, it's fine to say yes.

2

Ask for the time back

Saying yes doesn't mean losing the time. Ask for it to be made up, on a date you agree now, not "sometime".

3

Name the pattern, once and calmly

Say clearly how you want it to work from now on: ask first, before anything is booked or mentioned to the children. Put it in writing, and in your parenting plan if you have one.

4

Hold it next time

If it happens again after you have been clear, you can say no. Keep it calm, and don't make the children feel it's their fault or yours. Offer another date for the visit if you can.

INSTEAD OF

~~"You have done it again. You always book things on my time and then make me the bad guy."~~

TRY

I'm happy for them to go to your mum's party, as I know it matters to them. Could I have them the following Saturday instead? For anything else on my time, please ask me before booking or mentioning it to the children, and I'll always try to say yes.

If you do say no, keep the children out of it. They don't need to know who said what. "That day doesn't work, but we will find another one" is enough.

Back it up

Keep a short record. Each time a boundary is crossed, note the date, what was agreed, what happened and any effect on the children. Facts only. It helps you see patterns, and helps any professional you speak to later.

Decide the consequence in advance. A boundary without a consequence is a wish. Choose something you control, that's in proportion and never at your child's expense:

- Late-night messages: you reply the next day.
- Handovers keep getting heated: move them somewhere neutral, or ask someone to help.
- Agreements keep being broken: suggest mediation, or get advice about a formal order.

Say it calmly once, then follow through. Don't threaten something you won't do.

When it's more than pushback

If it turns into threats, harassment, turning up uninvited, or stopping the children seeing you without good reason, it's gone beyond a communication problem. Get legal advice. If you feel unsafe, contact the police.

OVER TO YOU

You don't have to write the answers down, but many fathers find it helps.

1. How do you usually react when a boundary is pushed?
2. Which of these patterns do you recognise, and which technique will you try first?
3. Which of these could you confirm in writing more often?

CHAPTER 7

What your children need

IN SHORT

1. Children need reassurance, stability and freedom from adult conflict.
2. Keep explanations short, honest and free of blame.
3. Never ask your children to choose, carry messages or report back.

Separation changes your children's world. What helps them most isn't a perfect separation but parents who keep conflict away from them, keep their lives predictable and keep loving them openly. The family courts call this your child's welfare, and whether or not you ever go near a court, it rests on the same things: their physical and emotional needs, the effect change has on them, and how well each parent can meet what they actually need. [12]

How separation can affect children

Children react differently depending on their age, personality and what they have seen. Cafcass, which represents children's interests in the family courts, hears directly from children that they often feel somehow responsible for the separation, caught in the middle of the tension, powerless, lonely or ashamed, and that they grieve for what has been lost, even when nobody has died. [13]

You may also see it in how they behave: sadness, anger or worry, being clingy or withdrawn, and changes in sleep, eating or schoolwork. Younger children may go back a stage for a while, with bedwetting or tantrums.

Most of these ease with time when children feel secure. If they persist or worsen, talk to your GP, the school or a counsellor.

What children need from you

Children don't need much to feel safe. It comes down to three things.

- **To know they're loved.** The separation isn't their fault, and they're free to love both of you.
- **To know what happens next.** The same routines for meals, bedtime and school, and handovers they can predict.
- **To be kept out of it.** No arguments in front of them, no messages through them and no questions about the other home.

Everything else follows from those: honest answers at their level, space to talk when they're ready, and a dad who is looking after himself.

This isn't a guess at what might help. It's what Cafcass hears directly from children of separated parents themselves: that they need to be told plainly they aren't to blame, that they need permission to love both parents without feeling disloyal, and that hearing you criticise their other parent, especially where they can hear it, is one of the most distressing parts of the whole experience.[13]

Talking to your children

When they ask questions, keep your answers short, honest and free of blame.

TRY SAYING

Mum and I've decided we can't live together any more. That's a grown-up decision, and it's not because of anything you did. We both love you and that will never change.

If they ask why, you can say: "That's between Mum and me. What matters is that you're looked after by both of us."

If they repeat something negative the other parent has said about you, resist the urge to correct it with criticism of your own:

TRY SAYING

I'm sorry you heard that. Grown-ups sometimes say things when they're upset. I love you, and I'm always here.

Let them know this isn't a one-off conversation. They can come back to you with more questions as they think of them, and they don't have to work everything out the first time you talk. [14] If they would rather talk to someone outside the family, Childline is free and confidential on 0800 1111.

Never ask them to choose

Don't ask your children where they want to live, which parent they prefer or what happens at the other house. Even indirect questions put them in an impossible position. If there's a court case, Cafcass will hear their views in an appropriate way.

OVER TO YOU

You don't have to write the answers down, but many fathers find it helps.

1. What changes have you noticed in your children since the separation?
2. What does a predictable week look like in your home?
3. How would you answer if your child asked why you separated?

CHAPTER 8

Money, maintenance and the legal side

IN SHORT

1. Keep maintenance, finances and time with your children completely separate.
2. Put every financial arrangement in writing, and get a consent order if you were married.
3. Get advice early, especially if you weren't married or there are debts.

Money and legal process are among the biggest sources of stress after separation. They're also where boundaries matter most, because informal arrangements tend to drift and become new sources of conflict.

This chapter gives an overview for England and Wales. It isn't a substitute for legal or financial advice. It starts with the four things that need sorting, then takes each in turn, and ends with your own day-to-day money.

Keep the issues separate

There are four separate things to sort out. Each has its own route, and none of them should be traded against another.

What	How it's settled
Ending the marriage	Divorce, or dissolution of a civil partnership.
Money and property	An agreement approved by the court, or a financial order.
Child maintenance	An arrangement between you, or the Child Maintenance Service.
Time with your children	A parenting plan between you, or the family court as a last resort.

Don't stop paying maintenance because contact has stopped, and don't let time with your children be traded for money. Mixing them damages your position and does nothing for your children.

Divorce

Since April 2022, divorce in England and Wales has been "no fault". Neither of you needs to blame the other, and the divorce can't be contested except on very narrow grounds.[8] This removes one source of conflict, though the arrangements for children and money still need to be sorted out.

Money and property

If you were married or in a civil partnership, the divorce or dissolution itself doesn't decide the finances. That's done separately, either by agreement written up as a consent order and approved by the court, or by applying to the court for a financial order.[6] Without an order, financial claims can stay open for years.

The court looks at factors such as income, needs, the children's welfare, contributions and the length of the relationship. Spousal maintenance is possible but isn't automatic.

If you weren't married. The position is different and usually depends on property law and, for children, Schedule 1 of the Children Act 1989. Get advice early.

Child maintenance

Parents can agree child maintenance between themselves, which is often called a family-based arrangement. If you can't agree, either parent can use the Child Maintenance Service (CMS), which works out an amount based mainly on the paying parent's income and the number of nights the children stay with them.[5] Shared care reduces the amount.

The CMS can run as Direct Pay, where parents pay each other, or Collect and Pay, where the CMS collects and passes on payments for a fee. The government has announced plans to

change how payments are handled, so check the current position and any fees on GOV.UK. The free Child Maintenance Options service can talk you through the choices.

Whatever you agree, put it in writing and pay by standing order so there's a clear record.

Mediation

Mediation can help you discuss finances after separation. Tell the mediator if there has been abuse or intimidation so they can assess whether mediation is suitable. Government guidance on family mediation.

Mediation for child arrangements The MIAM and exemptions in Family Court Roadmap.

Your own money

Separation usually means running two homes on the same money. Start with a simple list of what comes in, what goes out and what you owe. Cut where you can, but protect the costs that make your time with your children work: a bed for them, travel, the basics. If you're struggling, get free debt advice early. Citizens Advice and StepChange can help.

A few boundaries keep money from becoming a new source of conflict. Once you have taken advice, close or separate joint accounts, change your passwords and remove shared access to online banking.

Agree in writing how extra costs like school trips, uniforms and clubs will be split. And don't lend money informally, or agree to "sort it out later".

OVER TO YOU

You don't have to write the answers down, but many fathers find it helps.

1. Which financial matters are still informal or unresolved?
2. Do you have a clear picture of your new budget?
3. Is there anything you need advice on this month?

CHAPTER 9

Co-parenting, parallel parenting and the space between

IN SHORT

1. Parallel parenting is a legitimate, child-focused choice when cooperation leads to conflict.
2. Cooperate where it helps your child and stays calm. Go parallel where it doesn't.
3. A detailed written plan reduces what there is to argue about.

Parents who live apart broadly have two approaches open to them, with plenty of middle ground.

Co-parenting

Co-parenting means working together closely. Parents talk regularly, agree shared rules and routines, make decisions jointly and may attend events together. When it works, children benefit from consistency and from seeing their parents cooperate.

It needs a reasonable level of trust, similar parenting values and the ability to disagree without it turning into a row. Many parents can't manage that soon after separation, and some never can. That isn't a failure.

Parallel parenting

Parallel parenting is designed for situations where close co-operation leads to conflict.

Each parent runs their own home in their own way, within the basic safety and welfare of the children. You communicate mainly in writing, briefly, and only about the children. Handovers happen at school, nursery or a neutral place, so you rarely need to meet.

It rests on two things: a clear, detailed written plan, so there's little left to negotiate, and accepting that the other home will do some things differently.

The aim is to take the children out of the line of fire. Less contact between parents means fewer opportunities for conflict, and fewer arguments for the children to see.

Comparing the two

Area	Co-parenting	Parallel parenting
Communication	Frequent, often by phone or in person	Brief, written, about the children only
Rules and routines	Agreed between homes	Each home sets its own
Decisions	Made together	Major decisions agreed in writing. Day-to-day decisions made by whoever has the children
Handovers	Often at either home	At school, nursery or a neutral place
Events	May attend together	Take turns, or attend separately
Flexibility	Agreed informally	Changes agreed in writing, with notice
Best suited to	Low conflict, good trust	High conflict, low trust, early separation

The space between: cooperating when it works

Most families don't sit neatly in one box. You might run parallel homes day to day but still cooperate on a birthday party, a school issue or a child's illness. You might start with strict par-

allel parenting and loosen it as things calm down. Or you might need to tighten it again after a difficult patch.

TWO APPROACHES, AND THE SPACE BETWEEN

Co-parenting

You talk often, agree shared rules and make decisions together.

Suits low conflict and good trust.

The space between

Separate homes day to day, cooperating on what matters most, like a birthday, a school issue or an illness.

Where most families sit.

Parallel parenting

Brief, written contact about the children only. Each home sets its own rules.

Suits high conflict, low trust or early separation.

⇄ You can move along the line in either direction as things change.

Neither end is better. The right place is the one that keeps conflict away from your children.

A useful way to think about it: cooperate on the things that matter most to your child and that you can do without conflict, and go parallel on the things that keep causing rows.

Review it every few months. As trust grows, you may be able to do more together.

Cooperation should be offered, not forced. If a joint birthday party is likely to end in an argument, two smaller celebrations are better for your child.

Making a parenting plan

A written parenting plan is the backbone of parallel parenting. It should cover where the children live and when they're with each parent, handovers, holidays and special days, how big decisions about school and health are made, and how you will communicate and deal with changes.

Cafcass provides a free template through its Planning Together resources.[9] **What to include** Parenting plan outline.

When you can't agree arrangements Trying to agree first in Family Court Roadmap.

When parallel parenting is not enough

Where there has been domestic abuse, even limited direct contact may not be safe. Handovers may need to happen at a child contact centre, or through a trusted third party, and communication may need to go through solicitors. If you're in that position, take advice and follow any court orders exactly.

OVER TO YOU

You don't have to write the answers down, but many fathers find it helps.

1. Which approach fits your situation now?
2. What are two things you could cooperate on without conflict?
3. What does your current plan leave unclear?

CHAPTER 10

Handovers, school, health and holidays

IN SHORT

1. Plan handovers so they're short, calm and away from adult conversation.
2. With PR, you're entitled to be involved with school and health directly.
3. Get written consent well before taking a child abroad.

The practical side of parenting from two homes is where boundaries are tested most often. Clear arrangements in advance prevent most problems.

Handovers

A good handover is short, on time and a bit boring. That's the aim.

Pick the place with care. School or nursery pick-ups mean you and the other parent don't have to meet at all. If you do need to hand over in person, a neutral public place works well.

Keep it brief and warm. Be on time, and send a short message if you're running late. Say a cheerful goodbye to your child, whatever you feel about the other parent. Adult matters can wait for a message later, not the doorstep or the car park.

Know what you will do if it goes wrong. If a handover doesn't happen, don't argue or wait for hours. Make a note of it and follow up in writing.

If handovers have become unsafe or keep ending in conflict, a child contact centre may help. NACCC can help you find an accredited centre.

School

With parental responsibility, you're entitled to be involved in your child's education, whether or not they live with you. Department for Education guidance says schools should treat all parents with PR equally, unless a court order says otherwise.[10]

Start by making sure the school has your contact details and knows you want your own copies of reports, letters and event news. Let them know, briefly and neutrally, that the family has separated, so they can support your child if needed.

After that, deal with the school directly. You can speak to your child's teacher yourself, without going through the other parent, and ask for a separate parents' evening appointment if attending together is difficult.

At home, keep the routine for homework, reading and kit the same each week.

Health

With PR you can register with your child's GP, attend appointments and receive information.

Agree in your parenting plan how you will share information about illness, medication and appointments. Keep any medication and instructions moving between homes with your child.

Holidays and travel abroad

The rules depend on whether there's a court order.

No court order. Taking a child out of the UK without the consent of everyone with parental responsibility can be a criminal offence.[11]

A child arrangements order. The parent the child lives with can usually take them abroad for up to a month without consent, unless the order says otherwise. A parent the child spends time with, but doesn't live with, normally needs consent.

Either way, ask for written consent well in advance, with dates, destination and contact details. Give the same information when the other parent travels.

Money for the children

Keep receipts for extra costs like school trips, uniforms, clubs and birthday presents. Chapter 8 covers agreeing this in writing.

Special days

Birthdays, Christmas, Eid, Diwali, Mother's Day and Father's Day can be flashpoints. Plan them months ahead. Alternating years, splitting days or holding two celebrations are all common.

Help your children make a card or choose a present for the other parent's special day. It shows them that loving both of you is safe.

OVER TO YOU

You don't have to write the answers down, but many fathers find it helps.

1. Which practical arrangement causes the most friction right now?
2. Does the school have your details and know you want to be involved?
3. Which special day do you need to plan for next?

CHAPTER 11

New partners and blended families

IN SHORT

1. Introduce new partners slowly, after telling the other parent.
2. Keep discipline and big conversations with the parent, not the new partner.
3. Support your children's relationship with the other parent's new partner unless there's a real concern.

At some point, you or the other parent may start a new relationship. Done carefully, a new partner can add warmth and stability to a child's life. Done in a rush, it can unsettle children and stir up conflict.

You may be ready for someone new long before your children are. That's normal. Go at their pace, not yours. [16]

Introducing a new partner

There's no perfect script, but the order matters: be sure first, tell the adults, then the children, then keep the first meeting small.

Wait until it's serious. Children can get attached quickly, and if a partner comes and goes, that's another loss for them. Early in a separation they may also still be hoping their parents will get back together.

Be confident they're safe around your children. That's part of your job as their dad, however well you think you know someone. [16]

Tell the other parent, then the children. Tell the other parent first, briefly and politely, so they don't hear it from the children. Then tell the children yourself, in simple, honest words that fit their age. Make it clear that nothing changes about your time with them.

Start small. A short first meeting, an hour or so, somewhere neutral like a park or a café. Not a holiday or a sleepover. Build up slowly from there. [16]

A message to the other parent can be this short:

TRY SAYING

I wanted to let you know I've been seeing someone for a few months. I'm planning to introduce her to the children briefly next month, and I'll keep it low-key.

How your children might feel

Children can feel pushed out, worried they will lose you, or loyal to their other parent. Some become clingy or jealous, or are rude to your partner. That's normal, and it usually settles with time.

Listen without getting defensive, and reassure them you're not going anywhere. Keep your one-to-one time with them, especially early on, so they don't feel replaced.[16]

INSTEAD OF

~~"You need to be nicer to Sarah. She's trying really hard with you."~~

TRY

It's OK to feel a bit funny about Sarah being around. You can always tell me. Nothing changes about you and me.

Roles in the household

Your partner's role is to be a kind, reliable adult. It isn't to replace the other parent, or to take over discipline.

You stay in charge of discipline and the big conversations. Early on, don't leave your partner looking after the children on their own. As trust grows, roles can develop naturally.

Moving in together

Moving in is a big step for children, so give them plenty of notice and a say in what they can.

Before you do, agree with your partner what their role will be with your children, and what the house rules are, especially if they have children too. Make sure your children still have their own space in your home.

Check the practical side as well. The move should still let them keep a good relationship with their other parent, including travel time and school. [16]

When the other parent has a new partner

This can be hard, especially if you're still grieving. Your children may like the new partner, and that can sting. Remember that another caring adult in their life is usually good for them.

Don't criticise the other parent's new partner, or question your children about them. If your child talks about them, be warm about it.

INSTEAD OF

~~“So what's he like then? Does he stay over? What does your mum say about me?”~~

TRY

Sounds like you had a nice weekend. I'm glad.

If you have a genuine concern about how a new partner is behaving towards your children, write down what you have seen or been told, and take advice. Don't raise it in an argument.

Blended families

When households combine, children may be adjusting to stepparents, step-siblings and new routines all at once. Blended families often take years to settle, not months, so be patient with everyone, yourself included.

Two things help most. Keep regular time alone with your own children, and have clear house rules that apply to all the children fairly.

Avoid comparing your home with the other one. And ask everyone how it's going from time to time, then listen to the answer.

OVER TO YOU

You don't have to write the answers down, but many fathers find it helps.

1. If you have a new partner, what does your child need to know, and when?
2. How do you feel about the other parent having a new partner?
3. What would help your children if households combine?

CHAPTER 12

Looking after yourself through it

IN SHORT

1. Looking after yourself is part of looking after your children.
2. Name your emotions so they don't come out sideways.
3. Build support in layers, and start with one message to one person.

You can't be a steady father if you're running on empty. Looking after yourself isn't self-indulgence. It's part of looking after your children. Chapter 2 covered the grief that comes with separation itself. This chapter is about sustaining yourself through what comes after.

Making sense of your emotions

Separation stirs up sadness, anger, fear, relief, guilt and loneliness, sometimes all in one day. Trying to push them down usually makes them come out sideways: at work, at the children, at

the other parent or in drink. Naming them, even privately, takes some of the pressure off.

Some fathers find it helps to write for ten minutes at the end of the day. Others talk to a friend, walk, run or train. Find what works for you.

Practical self-care

You don't need a programme. Get three basics roughly right and the rest gets easier.

Sleep. Protect it. Everything else is harder when you're tired.

Food. Regular meals, even simple ones.

Movement. Anything that gets your heart rate up, ideally outside. Many men find exercise the most reliable way to manage stress, and a walk on the beach or in the park does more than it sounds.

Two things to keep an eye on. Be honest with yourself about how much you're drinking, and cut back if it has crept up. And keep some routine on the days you don't have your children, which can be the hardest.

If your sleep, mood, appetite or drinking are affected, book an appointment with your GP.

Building a support system

Think of support in layers, starting with the people closest to you.

SUPPORT IN LAYERS

Professional support
A GP, counsellor or solicitor, when you need expert help.

Peer support
Other separated fathers, who understand without explanation.

Wider support
Friends, family, colleagues and teammates who keep life feeling normal.

Close support
One or two people you can be completely honest with.

You don't need every layer filled. One honest conversation is a start.

Many men find reaching out the hardest part. Start with one message to one person. "Things have been tough lately. Fancy a pint or a walk this week?" is enough.

OVER TO YOU

You don't have to write the answers down, but many fathers find it helps.

1. Which part of practical self-care has slipped most?
2. Who are the people in each layer of your support, and is anyone missing?
3. What's one message you could send to one person this week?

CHAPTER 13

Moving forward

IN SHORT

1. Moving on means giving the present more attention than the past.
2. Confidence comes back through action: keep commitments and hold boundaries.
3. Forgiveness is for your benefit, and it never means dropping your boundaries.

There comes a point when the separation stops being the main story of your life. It may not feel that way yet. But most fathers do reach a place where life is steadier, the children are settled and the conflict takes up far less room.

Why moving on matters

Staying stuck in the past keeps you reacting to it. Moving on doesn't mean forgetting or pretending it didn't matter. It means letting the present and future take more of your attention than

what went wrong.

When your mind drifts back to old arguments, bring it gently to what's in front of you: the next meal with your children, the next run, the next piece of work.

Rebuilding your life

Rebuilding isn't one big change. It's a handful of small, practical things, like setting a goal you can reach, making your home feel like yours, clearing out what you no longer need and noticing what's going well.

FOUR SMALL PLACES TO START

Set small goals

A tidy spare room for the children. A weekly kickabout. A course. A savings target.

Make your home yours

Somewhere that feels like a base, for you and for your children.

Clear out what you no longer need

Things, habits and sometimes people.

Notice what is going well

Write down three good things at the end of each week.

None of these needs to be big. Pick one and start this week.

Regaining confidence and self-respect

Confidence returns through action rather than thinking. Keep your commitments to your children. Hold your boundaries. Do things that scare you a little. Challenge the negative stories you tell yourself, and replace them with things that are true: "I'm a good father. I'm getting through this."

After months of criticism, it's easy to measure yourself by what the other parent, or the court, says about you. Anchor your worth instead in what you know to be true: that you love your children, that you're trying, that you show up.

Relationships shape us, and after a long one you may not be sure who you are on your own. That's normal. Try things. Pick up an old interest or a new one. Join a club, a team or a class. Spend time outside. Notice what makes you feel more like yourself, and do more of it.

Finding meaning and purpose

Many fathers find that, once the worst has passed, they want what they went through to count for something. That might be supporting other dads, volunteering, coaching a team, retraining or simply being more present with their children than before. Purpose doesn't have to be grand. It just has to be yours.

Forgiving and letting go

Forgiveness is often misunderstood. It doesn't mean excusing what happened, trusting someone who hasn't earned it or giving up your boundaries. It means putting down the weight of resentment, because carrying it hurts you more than anyone else.

Forgiveness may include forgiving yourself for your own mistakes in the relationship. Most of us made some.

It's a process, not a single moment, and you may need help with it. A counsellor can be useful here. Where there has been abuse, you don't have to forgive in order to move on, and nobody should pressure you to.

OVER TO YOU

You don't have to write the answers down, but many fathers find it helps.

1. How have you changed since the separation?
2. What's one small goal for the next three months?
3. Is there anything you need to forgive yourself for?

CHAPTER 14

Dating again and the long view

IN SHORT

1. Date again when you're ready. Be upfront, speak fairly about the other parent and keep your children's time theirs.
2. Your children will remember how this period felt more than what happened.
3. Calm, consistent parenting adds up, even when you can't see it yet.

Dating again

A separation doesn't end your chance of a good relationship. Many fathers go on to find one, and a better one than before.

You also bring more than you may think. You know what matters to you now. You have learned to stay calm under pressure, to say what you can and can't do, and to put your children first. Those are attractive qualities, and they're the same ones that make a relationship last.

Are you ready?

There's no right time, and nobody else can tell you. A few honest signs help.

You can talk about the separation without it taking over. You want to meet someone because you would enjoy it, not to fill a gap or prove a point. Your children are reasonably settled. And you have a clear idea of what you want, and what you won't accept again.

If that isn't you yet, that's fine. "Not yet" is an answer, not a failure.

Getting it right

Keep it light at first. A coffee or a walk is plenty for a first date. There's no deadline. You're just finding out whether you enjoy someone's company.

Be upfront about your life. Say early on that you have children and when you have them. It's part of who you are, and the right person will respect it. You don't owe anyone the full story of your separation on a first date.

Speak about the other parent briefly and fairly. How you talk about your ex tells a new person a lot about you. A short, calm version is enough. Save the rest for a friend or a counsellor, because a date isn't the place to work through it.

INSTEAD OF

~~"My ex made my life hell. You wouldn't believe what she put me through."~~

TRY

We separated a couple of years ago. We share the care of the children, and it works.

Be curious about them. After a hard few years it's easy to talk too much, or to stay guarded. Ask questions and listen to the answers. Being interested is worth more than being impressive.

Bring your boundaries with you. The skills you have built apply here too. Say what you can and can't do, kindly and early: "I have the children that weekend. How about Thursday?" Then notice how they take it. Someone who respects a small no is showing you something good.

Notice the patterns, good and bad. If something feels familiar in an uncomfortable way, pay attention. Look for the good signs as well: someone who is kind, does what they say and is glad you're a committed dad.

Keep your children's time theirs. A new relationship should fit around your time with them, not the other way round. Date on the days you don't have them, and get to know someone well before involving your children. Chapter 11 covers introductions.

Expect a few knock-backs. Dates that go nowhere and messages that go unanswered are normal for everyone. They aren't a verdict on you. If it starts wearing you down, take a break and come back to it.

The long view

Your children will grow up. The arrangements that feel all-consuming now will change as they reach secondary school, then their teens, then adulthood. One day they will look back on this period and remember mostly how it felt: whether they were kept out of the middle, whether their dad was steady and whether they felt loved in both homes.

You can't control everything about how that story goes. You can control a great deal of your part of it. Every calm message, every reliable handover, every boundary held without spite and every evening spent fully with your children adds to it.

Parallel parenting isn't a second-best. For many families, it's what makes a peaceful childhood possible. And sometimes, over the years, the parallel lines start to bend towards each other. Two parents who could barely be in the same room end up standing together at a graduation or a wedding. That can't be forced. But it's more likely when both homes have been given the space to settle.

OVER TO YOU

You don't have to write the answers down, but many fathers find it helps.

1. Are you ready to date again, or do you need more time?
2. What do you want your children to remember about this period?
3. What would you tell yourself on the day you separated?

Scripts at a glance

Short, ready-made words for common situations. Adapt the names and details to fit.

Setting a response time

> I check messages about the children each evening and will reply then. If something is urgent, please call.

Moving to one channel

> To keep things clear, could we use email for arrangements about the children from now on? I'll keep messages short.

Asking for notice of changes

> To keep things settled for Ella, could we agree changes at least 48 hours ahead unless there's an emergency? I'll do the same.

Declining a change

That doesn't work for me this weekend. I can do Sunday morning instead if that helps.

Bringing it back to the children

I'd rather keep these messages to arrangements for the children. On Saturday, I'll collect at 10am as planned.

Handover heating up

Let's pick this up later. I'll take Jack now and drop him back at 6.

Repeated lateness

The last two handovers have started later than agreed, and Mia has been upset waiting. Can we stick to 5pm, or agree a new time?

Missed handover

I was at school at 3.15pm as agreed and Leo wasn't collected from me. Please let me know when I'll next see him.

Responding to criticism

Answer only the practical question. Don't reply to the criticism.

Offering cooperation

Would you like to do a joint birthday tea for Sophie this year, or would two smaller ones work better?

Telling the other parent about a new partner

I wanted to let you know I've been seeing someone for a few months. I'm planning to introduce her to the children briefly next month.

Asking for travel consent

I'd like to take the children to Spain from 2 to 9 August. I'll send the flight details, address and a contact number. Can you confirm in writing that you consent?

Your child asks why you separated

Mum and I decided we can't live together any more. That's a grown-up decision and it's not because of anything you did. We both love you.

Your child repeats criticism of you

I'm sorry you heard that. Grown-ups sometimes say things when they're upset. I love you, and I'm always here.

Relatives asking for details

I appreciate you asking. I'd rather not go over the separation, but I'd love to talk about anything else.

Reaching out to a friend

Things have been tough lately. Fancy a pint or a walk this week?

Parenting plan outline

Use this as a starting point for a written plan. Cafcass's Planning Together template covers similar ground in more detail.[9]

PRACTICAL TEST

Want to build it properly? The children's plan builder walks you through these topics one child at a time, so each child's needs are written down, and gives you a plan to print or share.

Section	What to agree
Living arrangements	Where the children live and the regular pattern of time with each parent, including overnights.
Handovers	Where, when and who. School or nursery pick-ups where possible. What happens if someone is late.
School holidays	How the summer, Easter, half terms and Christmas are split. How far ahead dates are confirmed.

Section	What to agree
Special days	Birthdays, religious festivals, Mother's Day, Father's Day and other family occasions.
Communication between parents	Which channel, what topics, expected response times, what counts as urgent.
Children's contact with the other parent	Phone or video calls when they're in the other home: when and how often.
Education	How school choices are made, who attends parents' evenings, how reports and letters are shared.
Health	GP and dentist, sharing information about illness and appointments, medication between homes.
Activities	Clubs and hobbies, who takes them, how costs are shared.
Money	Child maintenance arrangement, how extra costs are split, how receipts are shared.
Travel	Notice and information needed for holidays in the UK and abroad, and written consent.
New partners	How and when new partners will be introduced, and telling the other parent first.
Changes	How much notice for a change, how it's requested and confirmed.

Section	What to agree
Disagreements	What happens if you can't agree: a cooling-off period, then mediation.
Review	When the plan will be looked at again, for example every six months or at the start of each school year.

Contacts and resources

Numbers and opening hours were correct at the time of writing. Services sometimes change, so check the website too.

Parenting after separation

- Cafcass Information for separated parents, including the Planning Together parenting plan. cafcass.gov.uk. Cafcass Cymru in Wales: gov.wales/cafcass-cymru
- GOV.UK: Making child arrangements Guidance on agreeing arrangements and applying to court. gov.uk/looking-after-children-divorce
- Family Mediation Council Find an accredited mediator and check the voucher scheme. familymediationcouncil.org.uk
- NACCC Find an accredited child contact centre. naccc.org.uk
- Families Need Fathers Peer support groups and information for separated parents. fnf.org.uk

Money and maintenance

- Child Maintenance Options Free, impartial help with child maintenance choices. gov.uk/making-child-maintenance-arrangement
- Child Maintenance Service gov.uk/child-maintenance-service
- Citizens Advice citizensadvice.org.uk
- StepChange Free debt advice. stepchange.org

Legal advice

- Civil Legal Advice Checks eligibility for legal aid: 0345 345 4345. gov.uk/check-legal-aid
- Advicenow Plain English guides for people dealing with separation and the family court. advicenow.org.uk
- Law Society Find a Solicitor Look for experience in family law. solicitors.lawsociety.org.uk

If you are affected by domestic abuse

- ManKind Initiative Helpline for male victims of domestic abuse: 0808 800 1170 (weekdays, 10am to 4pm). mankind.org.uk
- Men's Advice Line For male victims and those supporting them: 0808 801 0327 (weekdays, 10am to 5pm). mensadviceline.org.uk
- Respect Phoneline For anyone worried about their own behaviour towards a partner or family: 0808 802 4040. respectphoneline.org.uk

Wellbeing and crisis support

- NHS 111 Urgent mental health support in England, any time. Call 111 and choose the mental health option.
- CALM Helpline for anyone having suicidal thoughts: 0800 58 58 58 (5pm to midnight). thecalmzone.net
- Samaritans Someone to listen, free, any time: 116 123. samaritans.org
- Andy's Man Club Free weekly peer support groups for men. andysmanclub.co.uk
- NHS Talking Therapies Self-refer in most areas: search "NHS Talking Therapies" and your area.
- Your GP For anything affecting your sleep, mood, eating or drinking.

Concerns about a child

- NSPCC Helpline 0808 800 5000. nspcc.org.uk
- Childline For children and young people: 0800 1111. childline.org.uk
- Police 999 in an emergency, 101 otherwise.

None of these services can sort out your separation for you. What they can do is make sure you are not carrying it on your own.

Sources

The small numbers in the text point to these sources. Information and links checked November 2026.

1. Office for National Statistics, Domestic abuse prevalence and trends, England and Wales, Crime Survey for England and Wales, year ending March 2025.
2. Children Act 1989, sections 2 to 4; GOV.UK, Parental rights and responsibilities.
3. Serious Crime Act 2015, section 76 (controlling or coercive behaviour in an intimate or family relationship); Domestic Abuse Act 2021, section 1 (definition of domestic abuse, including after separation); Home Office, Domestic Abuse Statutory Guidance.
4. Cafcass, Top tips for parents who are separated, written by the Family Justice Young People's Board.
5. GOV.UK, Child Maintenance Service, how payments are worked out and Direct Pay or Collect and Pay.
6. Matrimonial Causes Act 1973; GOV.UK, Apply for a consent order.

7. Family Procedure Rules 2010, Part 3 (Mediation Information and Assessment Meetings); Family Mediation Council; GOV.UK, Family mediation.

8. Divorce, Dissolution and Separation Act 2020 (no-fault divorce, in force from 6 April 2022).

9. Cafcass, Planning Together parenting plan.

0. Department for Education, Understanding and dealing with issues relating to parental responsibility (updated August 2023).

1. Child Abduction Act 1984, section 1; GOV.UK, Permission to take a child abroad.

2. Children Act 1989, section 1 (the child's welfare as the court's paramount consideration, and the welfare checklist).

3. Cafcass, Coping with your child's reactions.

4. NSPCC, Supporting children through separation and divorce.

5. Cafcass, Communicating with your child's other parent after separation.

6. Welsh Government, Parenting Together, New partners.

Glossary

BIFF response

A way of replying to difficult messages: Brief, Informative, Friendly, Firm.

Boundary

A clear decision about what you will and will not accept, and what you will do if it is crossed.

Cafcass

The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service, which advises the family court on children's welfare in England. Cafcass Cymru does the same in Wales.

Child arrangements order

A court order deciding who a child lives with and who they spend time with, and when.

Child contact centre

A safe, neutral place for children to spend time with a parent or for handovers to take place.

Child Maintenance Service (CMS)

The government service that calculates and, if needed, collects child maintenance.

Co-parenting

Separated parents working together closely, with frequent communication and shared rules.

Collect and Pay

A Child Maintenance Service arrangement where the service collects child maintenance and passes it to the receiving parent. Collection fees apply.

Consent order

An order the court makes approving arrangements both parties have agreed, for example about finances.

Controlling or coercive behaviour

A pattern of behaviour used to control, frighten or isolate a partner or family member. It is a criminal offence.

Direct Pay

A Child Maintenance Service arrangement where it works out the amount and the paying parent pays the receiving parent directly.

Family-based arrangement

A child maintenance arrangement agreed between parents without using the CMS.

MIAM

Mediation Information and Assessment Meeting, usually required before applying to court about children or finances.

National Association of Child Contact Centres (NACCC)

The organisation that accredits child contact services and helps families find a suitable centre or service.

Non-molestation order

A court order protecting a person, or their children, from harassment or abuse.

Parallel parenting

An approach where each parent runs their own home, with brief written communication focused on the children.

Parental responsibility (PR)

The legal rights, duties and authority a parent has in relation to a child.

Parenting plan

A written, non-binding agreement between parents about arrangements for their children.

People-pleasing

Regularly putting other people's wishes ahead of your own needs to avoid conflict or disapproval.

Practice Direction 12J

The rules the family court must follow where domestic abuse is alleged or admitted in a children case.