

Teens FOCIS Handbook Reference Guide

Family Court Resource Services
Jackson County Family Court Division
The 16th Judicial Circuit
Missouri



Table of Content

- 3 Introductions**
- 4 What's happening?**
- 4 Why it's happening**
- 6 It not your fault**
- 6 Strategies**
- 6 Rights and Responsibilities**
- 7 Speak-up**
- 8 Caught in the middle**
- 9 Dealing with it**
- 9 Breaking the news**
- 10 Having two homes**
- 10 Staying connected**
- 10 Holidays and other celebrations**
- 11 Parents dating**
- 11 Abuse at home**
- 13 Stepparents**
- 16 Frequently ask Questions**
- 18 When to get help**

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to A teens FOCIS Handbook Reference Guide to Parental Separation and Divorce. If your parents have recently separated or divorced (or you think they may be about to), or you have a friend in that situation, this handbook is for you.

Parental separation and divorce are hard on teens. One thing that can help is information about what separation and divorce mean and how they might affect you. The purpose of this handout is to provide you with that information and is not intended to provide therapy, support or legal advice.



What's Happening and Why

Have your parents recently separated? Are they getting a divorce? Did it happen a few years ago? Or are you worried that it's going to happen soon? If so, read this section to find out:

- ☞ what separation and divorce mean
- ☞ some of the reasons why they happen
- ☞ why you are not the reason for your parents' separation or divorce.

What's happening

When people decide to live together and have children, they hope they will be together forever. Unfortunately, it doesn't always work out that way. Life can get pretty complicated. Sometimes, problems arise—not just the little everyday problems like who is going to take the garbage out, but big problems that parents just can't seem to solve, no matter how hard they try.

Parents separate when they can't solve their problems, and they decide they can't live together anymore.

Some married parents who separate decide to get a divorce, because they no longer want to be married.

Why it's happening

Sometimes parents split up when they have been fighting and unhappy for a long time. And sometimes it seems to happen suddenly, when nothing appeared to be wrong, and it's really hard to understand why they have to split up at all.

There are many reasons why parents decide to split up—as many reasons as there are couples. And with each couple, there might be one main reason, or a whole pile of reasons.

In any case, everyone has their own reasons. And whatever the reasons, it's never an easy decision; parents usually try very hard to solve their problems before they take action.

Why it's happening

Here are some common reasons why parents separate or divorce:

- ☞ They grew apart—Maybe they were both very busy and rarely saw each other, or a job or interest took them in a different direction, but one or both of them changed. The strong attraction they felt when they were first together was lost, or maybe they just can't agree on anything anymore. Sometimes parents don't see or acknowledge problems in their relationship until it's too late.

- Another relationship—If a parent falls in love with someone else, he or she might want to leave in order to be with that other person. Or the other parent might feel so betrayed that it is impossible to continue.

Why it's happening

Here are some common reasons why parents separate or divorce:

- Hard times—Sometimes a relationship breaks down under the strain of problems like a severe illness in the family, a parent losing a job, or a lack of money. If there were already problems in the relationship, hard times can be the last straw.
- Alcoholism, drug abuse, or *violence*—Addiction to alcohol or drugs (or even to other things like gambling), as well as violent behavior, can cause problems in a relationship and can ultimately end it.

You might have experienced some of the same things in friendships and relationships of your own.

Why it's happening

If you're not sure what your parents' reasons are for splitting up, you can always ask.

Your parents might be relieved that you have asked, and give you a direct answer. On the other hand, they might want to keep their privacy. Or they might not be able to give you a clear answer, because they're not all that clear about it themselves.

The worst thing that could happen when you ask your parents why they are splitting up is that they tell you things you don't want or need to know. For example, one parent could say really hurtful things about the other parent. If that happens, tell the parent that it hurts you to hear this, and ask him or her to stop.

Why it's happening

*No matter what kind of answer your parents give you, the most important thing is that you are not the reason for your parents splitting up. **It's not your fault!***

Parents split up with each other because of problems in their relationship. They don't split up with their kids.

Your parents are still your parents. *They still love you*, even if they don't love each other anymore.

It's not your fault

It's very common for teens to believe that somehow they have caused their parents to split up. You may be asking yourself things like, "Was it something I did?", or "Is it my fault?". Or thinking, "it wouldn't have happened if I hadn't argued so much, or I had done better at school, or..."

If you are saying things like this to yourself, *stop!* It's not your fault.

Remember: Parents split up because of problems in their relationship. They are responsible for splitting up, not you

Strategies

When your parents split up, you will probably find yourself having to deal with all kinds of new situations. This section gives you some strategies for dealing with them.

You'll find a list of your rights and responsibilities, and your parents' responsibilities, as well as tips on:

- ☞ how and when to speak up
- ☞ what to do if you're caught in the middle
- ☞ what to do in some other situations
- ☞ what to do if there is violence in your home.

Rights and responsibilities

You have the right to:

- ☞ Feel the way you feel about your parents splitting up
- ☞ express your feelings
- ☞ Ask questions about what is going to happen and why
- ☞ Love and be loved by both parents
- ☞ Feel safe
- ☞ talk to someone if you need help

Rights and responsibilities

You have the right to:

- ☞ not take sides
- ☞ not carry messages between your parents
- ☞ not hear your parents say bad things about each other
- ☞ not have adult worries.

It is your responsibility to:

- ☞ express your feelings in a way that doesn't hurt other people or things speak up if your parents are asking you to do things that don't feel right ask for help if you need it.

Rights and responsibilities

It is your parents' responsibility to:

- ☞ take care of you and keep you safe even though they live apart
- ☞ let you spend time with both parents and others who are important to you
- ☞ listen to what you say, even if they can't always do what you want them to
- ☞ answer your questions about money, where you are going to live, and so on, when you ask
- ☞ talk to each other with respect in front of you
- ☞ talk to each other about the things that involve you.

Speak up!

Talk about your feelings. It will make you feel better.

If there are things you need, ask. Your parents may be so upset or distracted that they forget your needs. It's OK to remind them that you have needs, and what they are. For example, you could say:

- ☞ I need you both to stay involved with me, and to find ways to make sure this happens.
- ☞ I need you to try to get along, especially about things that directly affect me.
- ☞ I need as few changes in my life as possible.

If there are things you need to know, ask. You should have as much information as possible about what is happening.

If you are concerned about something, speak up. For example, if you feel caught in the middle of your parents' problems, say so.

Caught in the middle

Do you feel caught in the middle of your parents' problems?

Sometimes parents use you in their battles—whether they know they are doing it or not. For example, one or both parents might:

- ☞ Ask you to carry messages
- ☞ Ask you to give them information about the other parent
- ☞ Ask you to keep secrets from the other parent.
- ☞ expect you to listen to him or her saying mean things about the other parent, or blaming the other parent for everything that has happened
- ☞ try to make you take sides, or choose one parent over the other.

Caught in the middle

If you are feeling caught in the middle:

- ☞ Tell your parents how you feel. They might not realize what they are doing, and once they do, they might stop.
- ☞ Say you would rather not carry messages, or spy on the other parent. If parents want to tell each other something, they should do it themselves. If a parent wants information, he or she should simply ask the other parent.
- ☞ Say you don't want to hear them complaining about each other, because it hurts you.

Caught in the middle

If you are feeling caught in the middle:

- ☞ Tell them they need to work out their problems themselves. It's not your job.
- ☞ Tell them you love them both, and you will not choose one over

the other.

- ☞ Don't get involved in your parents' arguments. If they are arguing in front of you, walk away.

If it's too hard for you to say things like this directly to your parents, try writing them in a letter.`

However you choose to do it, being able to talk to your parents about your feelings and to be clear about your needs will be useful skills as you face the changes and challenges that lie ahead.

Dealing with it

Here are some tips for dealing with other situations you may be experiencing, including:

- ☞ ***breaking the news*** to friends and others
- ☞ ***having two homes***
- ☞ ***staying connected*** with the parent you don't live with
- ☞ ***holidays and other celebrations***
- ☞ ***parents dating.***

Breaking the news

Some teens find it hard to tell their friends and others about their parents splitting up. Sometimes they worry about what others will think. Sometimes they think their friends will think they are different now, when all that has really changed is their family. Here are a couple of suggestions:

- ☞ Take your time. You don't have to tell anyone until you feel ready.
- ☞ Tell one friend at a time.
- ☞ Choose a quiet, relaxed time, when you know you'll have a few minutes to talk, without worrying about others listening, or having to rush off to class or another activity.

Remember: Good friends will be glad you've told them, and will know that you're still you, even though your family is changing.

Having two homes

Living part of the time with one parent and part of the time with the other can be a little confusing at first, but it can also be new and exciting. The first thing you will have to do is to get organized:

- ☞ Use a calendar so you know where you are going to be every day of the month. If you find that the schedule conflicts with

some of your activities, talk to your parents to see how you can make it work for everyone.

- ☞ Make a list of all the things you need to have with you at each home. Check it before you leave, to make sure you have everything.
- ☞ Try to get two of some things—like toothbrushes, hairbrushes, and other small things that you always need—so you don't have to carry them back and forth.

Having two homes

Next, make the new home feel comfortable:

- ☞ Ask the parent who has moved into a new home what you can do to make a space for yourself.
- ☞ Move some of your things into your new space, to help make it feel like your own.

If your parents have very different rules and lifestyles, you will probably have to do your best to get used to the differences. You might just come to enjoy them! But again, if you feel that your needs are not being met, say so. Maybe some things can be changed to help make you feel more comfortable.

Staying connected

If one parent has moved far away, or you don't get to see one parent very often, you might miss him or her. Even if you live part of the time with each parent, it's normal to miss the one you're not with.

There are lots of things you can do to feel connected. Here are a few suggestions:

- ☞ Decide on regular times to talk on the phone.
- ☞ Send e-mails often, even every day. (You could even write real letters!)
- ☞ Ask each parent for a special thing that reminds you of him or her, like a photo, and keep it with you.

Holidays and other celebrations

Special times like birthdays and Christmas can be hard at first.

Fortunately, there are lots of ways to deal with special times. Maybe you can celebrate twice, once with each parent. Or maybe you can celebrate one holiday with one parent, and the next with the other parent. Or alternate yearly—for example, have your birthday with your mom one year and with your dad the next year.

If you feel sad about losing some of your family's traditions for celebrations, try creating new ones. Each year, try to do some new things that you can do again next year—and the year after that. Before long, you'll find yourself with a wealth of new traditions.

Parents dating

As your parents begin to get on with their lives, they might start dating. It's normal for some parents who are newly single to enjoy their freedom and see lots of different people.

You might feel jealous, and want your parent all to yourself. Or you might feel betrayed, as though it's too soon after the separation or divorce for him or her to be seeing someone new.

Try to see it from your parent's point of view. And try to figure out why your parent's dating bothers you.

In addition, try not to judge your parent's new friends. And definitely don't try to drive people away. Just as you weren't responsible for your parents' splitting up, so you aren't responsible for their new relationships.

Abuse at home

Is there abuse or violence happening in your home? If so, there are some important things you need to know.

There are different kinds of abuse.

Abuse is using pain, fear or humiliation to get your way. Abuse can be:

- ☞ ***physical***—inflicting pain by pushing, restraining, pinching, shaking, slapping, punching, choking, and so on
- ☞ ***emotional or psychological***—name-calling, making threats, putting people down, humiliating and criticizing
- ☞ ***sexual***—inappropriate or unwanted advances or touching for a sexual purpose, or pressuring a person to have sex or to do sexual things he or she doesn't want to do.

Abuse at home

There is no excuse for abuse.

Healthy relationships do not include abuse. Period.

It's OK to have strong feelings, but it's not OK to express them by hurting others.

No one has a right to abuse another person. And no one deserves to be abused. *Ever.*

You are not to blame.

If there is violence in your home, whether against your parent, one of your siblings, or you, you are not to blame. The person who is abusing or being violent is responsible for his or her actions.

Abuse at home

You are not alone.

Abuse is an ugly secret in many homes. Lots of other children and teens experience abuse at home.

More importantly, there are people who can help. They can help:

- ☞ people who have experienced abuse
- ☞ people who have seen someone else being abused, and
- ☞ people who abuse.

Abuse at home

If there is abuse or violence in your home, seek help

If abuse or violence is being directed at one of your family members or at you, seek help right away! You may want to protect your family and not break the family secret, but it is very important that you tell.

If you or someone else in your family is in immediate **DANGER**:

- ☞ **call 9-1-1** (if you can, go to another room or a neighbor's place to call)
- ☞ don't get in the middle or try to protect the person who is being hurt
- ☞ stay away, and find a safe place in the house or at a neighbor's.

Abuse at home

If you aren't feeling safe at home:

- ☞ tell a teacher or school counselor
- ☞ talk to an adult you can trust, like the parent of a close friend
- ☞ contact the police or a social worker

It's important to find a supportive adult who can help, not just a friend. While it's good to have friends who will listen to you and support you, they may not know what to do to get help.

Abuse at home

Growing up with abuse doesn't mean that you will continue the cycle.

If you are worried about having the same patterns of abuse and violence in your own relationships as a teen or an adult, there is good news and bad news.

First, the bad news. Children who grow up in families where there is abuse learn from it, and can carry what they've learned into future relationships. They can learn that in order to get their way, they have to use coercion—and can become abusers. Or their self-esteem is so low that they feel they don't deserve better—and they can become victims.

Now here's the good news: you have a choice. It is possible to unlearn the behavior you have learned from your family. And the key to making that choice is **AWARENESS**.

Abuse at home

Here's what you can do to break the cycle:

- ☞ Find out about the differences between *healthy and abusive relationships*.
- ☞ Find out about *dating violence*, so you know what to watch for in your relationships.
- ☞ Seek counseling. A counselor can help you deal with your own feelings about what you have seen and experienced. He or she can also help you develop healthy ways to deal with your anger.
- ☞ Feel better about who you are. Remember that the violence you experienced or saw was not your fault. A counselor can also help you to improve your confidence and self-esteem.

Wondering how to find a counselor? Talk to your school counselor, your family doctor or another adult you trust. Ask him or her to help you find out about programs in your community that can help. (Most communities have services for victims of abuse and for abusers.)

Step Parenting

When two people get married, they expect to stay together forever. But sometimes people's feelings change over time, even when they have children together whom they both love. A couple might realize that they would be happier apart than they are together, and so they choose to get **divorced**. This is never an easy decision.

Divorce can be painful for parents, but eventually, each person involved starts to heal. The divorced parent may even meet someone new he or she would like to live with or marry.

Sometimes a spouse **dies** and the husband or wife is forced to start over. Despite all the pain of losing someone they love, in time, they might find people they want to share their lives with again.

When this happens, then another whole family is created. A new husband or wife for your parent means a new stepparent for you. It's normal to be **sad** and **scared** as your family changes and it may take some time to get adjusted to your new family situation.

Getting Used to Stepparents

Suddenly having a new adult in your life and your home can be really tough. You'll probably have lots of questions, like what you should call your stepdad or stepmom. (Some families use the person's first name.)

You also might wonder about rules and whether you really have to listen to your stepparent even if he or she is not your real mom or dad. A stepparent is another adult who's looking out for you, so it's best to give him or her the same level of respect you give your own parents, coach, or teacher at school.

You might worry about what will happen on holidays - who you'll be with and who you'll exchange presents with. These are all good questions and ones you should talk over with your family. You might want to talk with your parent alone or call for a group family meeting.

What if You Can't Get Along

OK, so you've given it some time. You've tried to like your stepmom - but you just don't get along! You can't stop wishing that things were the way they were before. But ask yourself, is it really her you don't like?

Could it be the fact that someone else is taking away some of your dad's attention? Or watching TV in the living room when there's a show on that *you* wanted to watch? Or taking extra-long showers in the bathroom? If something is bothering you, it helps to figure out exactly where the problem is happening, and speak up.

It's not easy sharing your parent and your home with a stepparent. (It can be even harder if your stepparent has children, and you have stepsiblings now, too!) Don't be afraid to let your mom or dad know that you miss spending time with him or her alone.

It's also a good idea to have a family meeting to hash out any problems. Maybe your stepmom can wait and take those long showers after you go to bed, and you can come up

with a schedule for sharing the TV. Better yet, maybe the family can do something other than watch TV, like play a game together.

But if you just can't seem to get along with your stepparent no matter what, it's time for a major heart-to-heart with your parent, and maybe your stepparent, too. When you're mad, it can be tempting to scream, "I can't stand her!" or "He's ruining my life!" But this will only hurt your stepparent's feelings and will not make anything better. Instead, explain why you're upset with your stepparent. Be specific about what the problems are and why you feel so [angry](#).

You might even go to a family counselor or [therapist](#). Sometimes someone who doesn't live with you and knows how families work can help figure out how you can all get along.

One Big, Happy Family

When you're still getting used to a new stepparent, it may seem as though things will never be OK. It takes a while to get comfortable with someone, and it also takes patience and lots of talking. But you might surprise yourself when you realize one day that you can't imagine your life *without* your stepdad anymore. He's the only one who understands what's so funny about that joke that everyone else thinks is dumb, and he makes the best peanut butter fudge sundaes!

It's also important to understand that when you do get along with your stepparent, it does not mean you care less for your parents, especially a parent you may no longer live with most of the time. A caring stepmother understands that you still love your mother and enjoy spending time with her. She will also understand how much you still love your mother, even if she died. Families are about love and understanding, not about competing with each other.

The more good you can find in your stepparent and your situation, the closer you'll become. And the entire family will be a whole lot happier - especially you.

Frequently asked Questions

1. What is the difference between separation and divorce?

When two people have been living together and they decide not to live together anymore, they are separated.

However, when married people separate, their marriage has not yet ended. They have to get a divorce to legally end a marriage.

Common-law couples don't have to get a divorce, because there is no marriage to end.

Frequently asked Questions

2. I'm feeling guilty about my parents splitting up. Was there something I did to cause it?

It's very common for teens to believe that they have somehow caused their parents to split up. But You are not the reason for your parents splitting up. Parents split up because of problems in their relationship.

It's not your fault!

Frequently asked Questions

3. Can I do anything to get my parents back together?

Most parents split up only after trying very hard to save their relationship. Their decision to separate or divorce is usually final.

Some teens hope and believe that if they try to be on their very best behavior, their parents will get back together. However, this plan isn't likely to work, since their parents' decision to split up had nothing to do with them.

Apart from suggesting that your parents see a marriage counselor, if they haven't already done so, the best thing that you can do is to begin to accept the situation so that you can get on with your life.

Frequently asked Questions

4. I have so many questions about why this has happened and what is going to happen in the future. How much can I ask my parents?

If there are things you need to know, ask.

You have a right to ask questions about what is going to happen and why. Although you need to respect your parents' right to privacy, they have a responsibility to answer your questions as best they can about things that directly affect you.

Frequently asked Questions

5. Will I be able to spend time with both parents?

In the vast majority of cases, children get to spend time with both parents. How much time you spend with each parent, and exactly how that will work, will depend on your [custody and access](#) arrangements.

Remember: Parents divorce each other, not their children. Your parents are still your parents, and they still love you.

Frequently asked Questions

6. I'm feeling really upset and confused about my parents splitting up. Is this normal?

Your parents splitting up might be the hardest thing you've ever had to deal with. So it's natural—and entirely normal—to experience some intense [emotions](#).

You will feel better over time. There are lots of ways to help yourself [feel better](#), and people who can [help](#) you if you need it.

Frequently asked Questions

7. Do I have to take sides, or choose one parent over the other?

No, you don't. You have the [right](#) to love and be loved by both parents.

If you are feeling pressured to take sides and you feel you are [caught in the middle](#) of your parents' problems, tell them. They might be so caught up in their own problems that they don't even know they are doing it, and once they do, they might stop.

Frequently asked Questions

8. If my parents divorce, will the same thing happen to me?

Many teens whose parents split up feel [anxious](#) about their own relationships in the future. But just because your parents split up doesn't mean the same thing will happen to you. You can learn from their mistakes. What happens in your relationships will be up to you, not your parents!

Frequently asked Questions

9. My parents never married. Do they have to go through the same process that married parents do when they split up?

Common-law parents—parents who chose to live together without getting married—don't have to get a divorce, because there is no marriage to end. But they do need to decide what will happen to their children and how the *Frequently asked Questions*

10. Who decides who I will live with? Do I get a say?

Ideally, your parents will make the decisions together about who you will live with and how that will work.

If they can't decide themselves, they might go to a mediator for help in reaching an agreement. Or they might have to go to court and have a judge make the decisions for them.

Whether your parents make the decisions about custody and access themselves, or with the help of a mediator or a judge, your opinion should be taken into account.

Frequently asked Questions

11. What will my friends say when they find out about my parents splitting up?

Lots of teens worry about breaking the news to their friends. Some feel embarrassed about what is happening.

Separation and divorce are very common these days: in Canada, between a quarter and a third of marriages end in divorce. That means that many people have been through it themselves, and most probably know someone who has.

Good friends will be glad you've told them. They'll know that you're still you, even though your family is changing.

Frequently asked Questions

12. I really feel like I need some help in dealing with this. Who should I ask?

There are lots of people around you who can help. Tell your parents, teacher, school counselor, family doctor or another adult you trust. If they can't help you themselves, they should be able to help you find someone who can.

If you aren't getting the help you think you need, keep asking until you get it.

When to get help

If the strong emotions that began when your parents first split up last for a long time, and are really getting in the way of the normal things you do in your life, ask for help. Feeling depressed, having trouble managing your anger, feeling extremely anxious, thinking about hurting yourself or escaping, or just feeling out of control are all situations that you can and should get help for.

Tell your parents, teacher, counselor or another adult you trust that you want to talk to someone who can help you,

And if you aren't getting the help you think you need, keep asking until you get it.

People

There are lots of people around you who can help you cope with your parents splitting up. Sometimes, just talking to a friend can help a lot, especially if his or her parents have also split up.

You can also talk to an adult you trust, like:

- ☞ a relative (an aunt or uncle, or your grandmother or grandfather)
- ☞ your teacher
- ☞ your school counselor
- ☞ someone at your place of worship
- ☞ your family doctor.

People

These people can help by:

- ☞ Just listening
- ☞ helping you to put things in perspective
- ☞ suggesting things you can do to make things better
- ☞ connecting you with other people who can help.

REFERENCE

WWW.familieschange.ca/teens

http://www.kidshealth.org/kid/feeling/home_family/blended.html

Human Relations Media video “The children of Divorce”

Texas Young Lawyers Association video “Kids in the Crossfire” Helping Parents Understand the Impact of Divorce.