



# Family Links Steps and Stages



The National Federation of Services for Unmarried  
Parents and their children

14 Gandon House, Custom House Square, IFSC, Dublin 1

LoCall 1890 252 084

01-6700 120 [info@treoir.ie](mailto:info@treoir.ie) [www.treoir.ie](http://www.treoir.ie)



Funded by the  
Family Support Agency

**Treoir** is the Irish word for direction or guidance. The reason we chose this word as a title for our organisation is because we give confidential, clear and up-to-date information to parents who are not married to each other and those involved with them. This information is free of charge.

*We have information on*

**1. Social Welfare entitlements**

- a. One-Parent Family Payment
- b. Rent Supplement
- c. Family Income Supplement
- d. Back to Work Allowance
- e. Back to Education Allowance
- f. Cohabitation

**2. Legal issues**

- a. Access
- b. Custody
- c. Guardianship (fathers' rights)
- d. Maintenance of children
- e. Passport applications
- f. Establishing paternity
- g. Registering the birth

**3. The importance of both parents in the lives of their children**

**4. Grandparents rights**

*And lots more.... see pages 91/92 for a list of publications*

**You can contact us by**

- phone: 1890 252 084
- e-mail: [info@treoir.ie](mailto:info@treoir.ie)
- drop-in: 14 Gandon House, IFSC, Dublin 1.
- Website: [www.treoir.ie](http://www.treoir.ie)

**The Family Support Agency provides support to families through:**

- Locally based Family Resource Centres
- Supporting organisations providing Marriage, Relationship, Child and Bereavement Counselling Services
- Family Mediation Service for couples going through a separation or divorce
- Research into family related matters
- Provision of information on family related matters
- Advising the Minister for Social and Family Affairs on family related matters

**Contact by**

- phone: (01) 6114100
- e-mail: [info@fsa.ie](mailto:info@fsa.ie)
- website: [www.fsa.ie](http://www.fsa.ie)



# Family Links

## Steps and Stages

*Positive pointers for lone parents who are helping their children to understand their family situation*

Published by



The national federation of services for  
unmarried parents and their children

14 Gandon House, Custom House Square, IFSC, Dublin 1.

Telephone: (01) 6700 120

LoCall: 1890 252 084

e-mail: [info@treoir.ie](mailto:info@treoir.ie)

[www.treoir.ie](http://www.treoir.ie)

© Treoir 2008

---

While every effort has been made to ensure that the information is accurate, no responsibility can be accepted by Treoir for any error or omission. This book is a guide only.

# Positive pointers for shared parenting

- Parenting is a job for life and for children there is no such thing as an ex-parent
- Forget that you were a couple; your only relationship now is as a united parenting team
- Don't let your own unresolved hurts get in the way of your children's relationship with their other parent
- Children recognise the importance of a continuing relationship or link with both parents, no matter how distant
- Children need to know that it is all right for them to love both parents and to like or love step-parents
- It is not adding people to children's lives but taking important people away that is hard for children to accept
- Try to come to terms with the fact that your children may have a relationship with their other parent over which you have no control
- All children, in both one and two parent families, can sometimes be difficult
- Don't try to get your children to take sides
- Even though your relationship with the other parent did not survive, this does not mean that either parent is a failure as a person
- Most importantly be positive about your children. They are unique and important human beings. Children's confidence and self esteem blossom when they hear good things about themselves and those close to them



# CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Chapter 1</b> <i>Living in a family where parents are living apart</i>	<b>9</b>
<b>Chapter 2</b> <i>Talking about your family situation</i>	<b>23</b>
<b>Chapter 3</b> <i>Shared parenting</i>	<b>35</b>
<b>Chapter 4</b> <i>New Families</i>	<b>59</b>
<b>Chapter 5</b> <i>Resolving disputes without going to court</i>	<b>79</b>
<b>Chapter 6</b> <i>A quick guide to legal remedies concerning parenting</i>	<b>83</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>87</b>
<b>Useful organisations</b>	<b>89</b>
<b>Treoir Leaflets / Publications</b>	<b>93 / 94</b>





# INTRODUCTION

The structure of family life in Ireland is becoming ever more varied in the 21st Century. More and more children are being born outside the institution of marriage, some into a stable cohabiting relationship and others into more short-term or non-existent relationships. This, coupled with the availability of divorce in Ireland and the increase in marital separation, means that an increasing number of children are experiencing family life with their parents living apart.

The *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* is clear that children should not be separated from their parents but if they are, ideally they should maintain direct contact and personal relations with them. While Ireland ratified that Convention in 1992 we have yet to develop models of good practice in parenting for families where parents are living apart.

*Questions for which answers are now being sought include:*

- how to talk to children about their family situation
- how to manage the parenting at a practical level where two parents are living apart
- how this might affect the children
- what place do both parents have in the lives of their children
- how, or if, both parents should stay in touch with their children
- what is the role of a new partner in the lives of the children

The truth is that there are no quick and easy, much less definitive, answers to these complex questions. (In fact there are as many answers as there are families). However, there are some basic principles which could be useful in formulating answers and these are outlined in this book.

Each family needs to formulate its own responses to its own particular situation and some do this very well. Every family is different, with different expectations, different dynamics, different personalities. Parents need to develop confidence in their own ability to deal with issues which arise within their own families in their individual circumstances and to learn as they go along to develop their own strategies for dealing with their own particular situations.

The experiences of parents who contact Treoir and wisdom gleaned from many publications are brought together in this publication. This publication is an addition to, not a substitute for, each family's own inherent wisdom.

This book is written with unmarried parents in mind. Most unmarried parents become parents in the context of a relationship and many parents go on to marry following the birth of their child. However, some relationships do not continue and this book is to provide some thoughts to assist those parents in parenting their children. It could also be useful to unmarried parents who never were in a relationship with their children's other parent, to married parents who are separating and indeed to any family where children are not living with both their birth parents.

In order to avoid the use of him/her or s/he, for the purposes of this publication a child is referred to as 'her' and 'she'.

# Chapter 1



*Living in a family where  
parents are living apart*

## ***Are we a family?***

This is one of the most frequently asked questions regarding families where parents are living apart.

Families come in many combinations of adults and children:

- Two parents living together (married or not) with children
- Two parents living apart but both sharing the parenting
- One parent with a child and the other parent not very much, or not at all involved
- A mother and child living with mother's parents
- Step-families
- Adopted families
- Foster families
- Gay and lesbian families
- Many other kinds of families

It is important to note that a household where the two parents are married and live together is not the only emotional structure within which a child can be happy and healthy. Seeing the family as a team of people concerned about each other, is a good basis for any family. Whatever your living arrangements, you are still a family.

### ***Family members feel important to one another.***

For many children 'family' consists of a wide range of people, and it is the roles that these people perform, and the quality of the relationships, that define them as 'family'. For children love, care, mutual respect and support are key characteristics of 'family'.

On the whole, the people who are important to children are people who are available to them.

### ***Watch your language!***

You may need to move away from the concept that a 'one-parent family' is automatically a second-class way to raise children - one parent is perceived as having custody and is often viewed as heading an 'incomplete' family. The other parent is perceived as having visiting rights and doesn't have a family at all!

You may need a new vocabulary to take a more positive view of life to replace the 'broken home' view. Often the language applied to families where parents are living apart puts them at odds, not at ease, with their society. Words exist to serve, not to oppress so we need to use the words that work for us, not against us. Families have not been broken, they have been reorganised.

Think of your relationship with the other parent in new ways. Do not think or refer to your 'ex-partner'. Refer to your child's other parent as the child's father/mother. This language can help you and your child to place your new focus where it belongs – on the parenting. It also can re-educate your child and yourself.

The words we use are important indicators of how we interpret things. For example, does a child 'visit' or 'live with' you at weekends? One father said *"Just saying 'live with me at weekends' gave me a terrific boost of parent confidence, I started thinking like a parent instead of a host with weekend guests."*

## **CHILDREN**

We would all prefer that our children's childhoods were stable and had as little disruption as possible. But real life is full of change, trauma and disruption - parents move home, move jobs, people have accidents, get ill or die, best friends fall out with each other.

***Children can and do learn to cope with growing up and facing the tragedies and traumas that life deals them.***

They can cope best with the support and love of their parents, family and friends. Research shows that grandparents and friends are key people in whom children also confide.

## ***Children' Feelings***

### **Children can feel sad or angry about their family situation if both parents are not living with them.**

Feeling sad can make you eat more or less, sleep less or not be able to concentrate at school. A good cry (or many good cries) can help as crying is a good way to release these feelings. However, if much crying persists over a long period of time it might be good to seek professional help.

Children may feel angry with their parents for not living together, for not being able to make their relationship work and for putting the children into a situation where they need to explain themselves to others. Try to explain your situation to children without blaming the other parent or giving details of your relationship that the children do not really need to hear. Give the information in a neutral or, if possible, a positive way, while reassuring your child that both parents still love and care for her.

### **Children may need to grieve.**

In a situation where the parents have never lived together and the other parent is only a little, or not at all, involved in the lives of the child there can be an on-going sense of loss for the child and no-one else can replace fully that other parent. The fact that a parent has not been a part of a child's life does not mean that the child does not experience loss. Blaming the other parent or making her/him out to be a bad person does not help children in these cases. Children will have to come to terms with their loss - and this is easier with your help.

Children need opportunities to express what they are feeling. This may seem obvious where a parent has died and children need time to mourn the loss, but it may not be so obvious where parents were never together or where parents separate.

Give your child plenty of opportunities to express feelings of sadness, anger or loss and listen to what they have to say (though this may be difficult for you, as you too must cope with your own difficult situation).

### **Children can feel guilty and blame themselves for their family situation.**

The child of an unmarried mother can feel she is the cause of her mother's loneliness, believing her father left her mother only because she was born. Some children can feel so angry with one of their parents that they really wish that parent would go away. So if Dad does leave home they think their wish has come true and may feel guilty about it. Older children might feel they could have prevented separation.

***It is especially important to assure your child that she is not to blame for the family situation***

It must be made clear to children that it is not their fault if their parents don't get on and that the children are not being rejected or abandoned. As one parent put it: ***"George and I were separating but the children still had a mother and a father who loved them and they could have us separately but not together"***.

Try to answer their questions truthfully and do not make up stories as this will only store up problems for the future.

**Children may worry that the parent who is caring for them may die.**

This can be a real worry for some children. If your child is old enough, share her concerns and make plans. It may be possible for her to live with her other parent, Granny or another family member in the event of your death, or perhaps a close friend would be more appropriate. You will need to discuss these plans with the other parent and/or with the person you choose to rear your child in the event of your death. Make sure your intentions are clearly understood and record them in a will. It will create peace of mind for all your family.

**Children can feel that they must be grown up.**

When there is only one parent in the family home, children of all ages can help do some of the things a partner might have done. An eight year old can help dress her younger sister and run messages but an eight year old wants to be a child too; a ten year old can understand some of your money worries but a ten year old does not want to be burdened with money worries; while a teenager may feel she has the responsibility to parent with you, the teenager may feel mixed up. She may wonder ***"Who is the parent around here?"*** or ***"You depend on me so much, will I ever be able to leave home?"*** Children enjoy and benefit from some extra responsibilities, but sometimes too much is expected of them. You need to find the right balance between encouraging your child to be independent while allowing her to enjoy her childhood.

**Children can be mistaken about some things**

Where parents are living apart children can have assumptions about their family situations which can be seriously damaging to the concept of shared parenting. For instance:

***“Daddy’s gone”.***

Some parents, particularly unmarried parents, can assume that when the relationship between them as a couple is over, the father should no longer be involved with the children, that they should all ‘move on’.

It can be a mistake to think that a clean break or lack of contact with one parent does not harm or mark a child in any way. Clearly defined regular contact and continuity with both parents is reassuring for small children, with arrangements being re-assessed with them, to incorporate their needs and social lives as they grow.

***Just because a relationship between parents is over does not mean that one parent disappears out of the child’s life or mind.***

***“Daddy doesn’t love me anymore”***

If there has been a lot of hurt and anger involved when the relationship ended one parent can punish the other parent by not letting her/him see the children. Inevitably, it is the children who suffer.

Even though their parents could not live happily with each other children need to know that their parents have not taken their love away from them. It is important that children feel and know that they have two parents who love them. Children can feel that they have been forgotten if they have less or lose contact with a parent.

***An important message from research studies carried out regarding children and parents who are separated is that children recognise the importance of a continuing relationship or link with both parents, no matter how distant.***

***“I don’t have a Daddy”***

Traditionally in our society it is the mother who has care of the children. While more and more fathers now wish to become or stay involved in their children’s lives, there can still be situations where fathers do not display any interest in their children. Children can perceive themselves as not having a father. This can be a very difficult situation for children, as they do not have the necessary information to deal with the questions which they will inevitably face as they make their way through life.



Each parent is an essential source of love, security, and continuity for their children. Each provides a different perspective on life to children, a different way of looking at the world and a different link with the outside world. Where it is not possible for children to live with both their parents together for whatever reason, it is important for children that both parents make every attempt to play a vital part in the lives of their children, even where no relationship ever existed between the parents.

***Children in all families need the ongoing affection, interest and concern of both their parents.***

It can be a special challenge to mothers to actively try to draw fathers into their children's lives particularly where fathers are not interested in becoming involved with their children. This can be a slow, difficult process but worth undertaking for the sake of the children. See page 55 for some more information on how to involve an absent parent.

#### ***"I have a new Daddy"***

Shared parenting can be especially difficult when one parent forms a new relationship. There can be an assumption that the child now has a new parent, instead of rather than as well as, the original parent. Excluding a parent from your child can be unfair on the child where relationships have already been formed with that parent and her/his extended families.

#### **Children may need space and help to sort out their feelings**

It is important to allow time and space for your child to express her feelings about the family situation and therefore to lighten her emotional burden. She needs to know that you understand and can withstand such feelings that she, herself, may not fully comprehend. Encourage her to talk honestly. You can reassure her that it is okay to be confused, angry, frightened or relieved about some things and sad about others. You can tell her it is all right to feel some of the things she feels - for instance, that it is all right to love both Mam and Dad and that both parents will always be her Mam and Dad. Reassure her that thinking about a parent she doesn't see, or live with full time, is okay and that just because a parent doesn't live with her full-time doesn't mean that parent doesn't love her.

Read her stories that reflect your situation or get her to draw or talk about her feelings. But be ready for what this may lead to! It can be very hurtful to be told by your child *"I hate you"* or *"Look what Dad and you have done to me"* or *"It's no wonder Daddy left"*.

Don't assume that because your child is not expressing any feelings that she has none. It is all too easy to hold inside angry and frightened feelings, especially if she is terrified that she could lose either or both parents. Many children cannot put their feelings into words, but instead behave differently. Very small children cannot verbalise their feelings, and will therefore act out their distress, often by regressing to an earlier stage in their development. Slightly older children are more able to speak out – sometimes in an angry or hostile way. Your child may begin to follow you everywhere, or schoolwork may slip back. Perhaps she is much more helpful about the house or might seem especially quiet. In contrast, she may get into arguments or start behaving in an uncharacteristic, anti-social manner.

***Children need re-assurance that both parents still love them even though the parents are not living together.***

Tell your child that it is important not to blame all her bad feelings on the family situation. Reassure her that bad feelings nearly always get better in time and that living in any kind of family has its difficulties.

If your child does not improve it may be that she needs professional help. Counselling is available and it is important to be open to counselling for your child before major problems occur.

Get help and support for yourself if your child is telling you things that are difficult for you to hear. You may need professional help in dealing with the emotional issues which surface from time to time. We all need someone to talk to at different stages in our lives.

***Remember that it is not an admission of failure to seek expert advice and/or help.***

### **Listen to your child**

One of the basic needs of all children, (and indeed adults) is to feel they are being listened to. They need to know that their point of view is understood and accepted. They need time and space to express their opinions on what is happening.

Children who don't feel listened to feel powerless and this can be a major influence on their feelings of self worth and their behaviour. Listening lets them know that they are cared about and that their point of view is understood. It helps them feel valued.

Ask your child about her point of view on key decisions. She will value being listened to. If you cannot do something her way, explain clearly why her wishes are not possible.

### **Keep your child well informed**

Being a child can be lonely and frightening especially if you do not know what is happening in your life and the important people - your parents - are so preoccupied with their own concerns that they forget to keep you informed.

Children deal much better with situations if they have a clear explanation of what is happening and what is likely to happen. Parents should be direct and simple in telling children what is happening and why, in a way that children can understand. The worst course is to try to hush things up and to make children feel they must not talk or even think about what they sense is going on. Unpleasant happenings need explanation, which should be brief, direct and honest.

Parents can often be convinced that children are 'too young' or 'too busy playing' to be told about their family situation. Or they may feel it will be easier on the children if they are protected from the truth. Keeping things from them makes young people feel that their feelings don't matter. They may imagine scenarios that are worse than reality.

#### *Children need -*

- facts, not negative emotions
- to be told basic information in a way that they can understand
- to understand what is happening and what has happened
- to know that it is all right for them to love the other parent even though you don't

#### *Children do not need*

- to hear the details of their parents' problems  
Your children do not want to know – and they should not know – how you may have hurt each other. They need to be able to respect both of you.

### **Children need continuity**

When children have and experience the continuity of parental love and concern they will be better able to accept their family situation. They can be reassured that the love of the people who care for them, their parents, remains the same. Continuity of parenting does not mean that two parents have to live in the same house.

Continuing contact with both sets of grandparents and other relatives will help children feel more secure that there is some continuity in their family life.

Where an unmarried father has been involved in a child's life, it is important that he continues to be in touch with his child where his relationship with the mother is over. It can be devastating for a child if the father stops visiting abruptly and this is not explained to the child.

### **...and flexibility**

Alongside this continuity is a need for flexibility so that children can explore new things but feel secure in the family setting. A good foundation for exploring the world is provided by continuing to give your child the message "*you are loved and valued in your own right*" and by making sure she receives this message in a way that is fitting to her age.

## **PARENTS**

Shared parenting or parenting alone can be lonely. You may long for the support or approval of the other parent. Perhaps you need advice on a problem or support for your decisions. You could look to close friends and family for support even in child-rearing decisions. However, the final decision is yours.

There is no point in ignoring the fact that there will be bad days. They will not go away on their own. It will take time and a lot of determination to banish them and still, occasionally, they will return, like ghosts, to haunt you.

***Remember that, while your relationship with the other parent did not survive, it does not mean that either partner, as a person, is a failure.***

## Popular myths

One of the myths we grow up with is that being a parent comes naturally, we automatically know what to do and we don't need to learn about what is involved. We can, therefore, expect too much of ourselves and can be very critical. Be patient with and kind to yourself, talk to other parents who are involved in shared parenting or parenting alone and give yourself occasional treats for a job well done! No one has all the answers and you are the best person to create new responses to your own family situation.

Another very popular myth is that children who live with both parents do not have any problems. The reality is that children whose parents are living together go through awkward patches, and face many difficulties at different stages of their lives. All families have their ups and downs but are still real families with good and bad times in the past, now and to come. It is an essential part of parenting to enable children to face, and deal with the difficulties which life presents.

## Coping with your feelings

How your child copes with your family situation depends on various factors but primarily on how you, her parent, is coping. Continuing anger or bitterness towards your child's other parent can injure your child and she can be further damaged by being exposed to ongoing conflict between her parents. As one writer puts it: *"Children caught in high conflict environments seldom thrive."*

Parents who manage their conflict and their separation well, and who don't embroil the children in the conflict, offer their children a safe passage through this time of change. For children's healthy development it is important for them to respect both parents.

Blaming one parent for the ending of the relationship is not helpful to a child and whatever you do, do not force or encourage your child to take sides. To do so creates anxiety, frustration, guilt and resentment - against you as well as the other parent. You need to separate your relationship as quarrelling partners from your role as parents.

The question that should be kept to the fore is *what is best for the children?* Children have a need and a right to know and love both parents where that is possible, just as parents have a need and a right to know and love their children. It is important that both parents understand this and try to put their own (often unresolved) emotions to one side in order that their children can at least have the possibility of a relationship with the other parent. This requires a good deal of trust and maturity from both parents.

### Children are not always angels

When you are trying to cope with the hurt and challenges of parenting alone or the end of a relationship your child may not be a little treasure who will ease the pain. You may be frightened and overburdened by the task, and resent her because her emotional and practical demands intrude on the job you have coping with your own problems. If you get sufficient support for yourself from friends, family or professionals it will enable you to give your child the love and understanding she needs. It will repay you a thousandfold and very quickly, because, as your child gains confidence and balance in her new world, the bond between you will strengthen.

Sometimes, however, you are unable to love your child and reassure her, perhaps because she reminds you of her other parent's faults, you blame her for the break up of your relationship, or because bringing up a child on your own restricts your life in so many ways. In these situations everyone feels unhappy and suffers, so it is important to seek help from others. If you don't have someone you can talk to contact one of the organisations listed at the back of this book which might be able to help, since they have experience of helping others in similar situations. If there are problems, don't wait for them to become serious before you seek professional help and do remember that many everyday problems concerning children respond to genuine love and common sense.

### Don't become confused regarding discipline.

The guilt parents may feel about their family situation could interfere in disciplining of children. Children need consistent direction, leadership and sometimes authority.

Try not to be over-permissive or indecisive. Children need and want to know quite clearly what is expected of them. They feel more secure when limits are set. They are confused when grown-ups seem to permit behaviour which they themselves know to be wrong and are trying to outgrow. As a parent, you must be ready to say "**NO**" when necessary, and in particular, don't be blackmailed with threats or stories about what the other parent permits.

The father-child relationship can become fragile where parents are living apart and for that reason children can be slow to misbehave on seeing their fathers, who can in turn seldom discipline or get angry with them. Many fathers do not want to take the risk of disciplining their children for fear of their children's anger. Fathers may fear that children may not 'want to come back' if they are harsh.

Good co-operation from both parents about discipline can contribute to both parents sharing the disciplinarian roles. Don't be tempted to make up for lost time through material goods or sloppy discipline.

Try to be honest and straightforward with your child and don't make promises you can't keep or threats you won't carry out.

### **As a parent...**

Being a parent is a very special and important role and responsibility. However, being a parent in any family is not easy. Being involved in shared parenting or parenting alone can bring additional issues.

You can do a great deal to help yourself. A leaflet entitled *Managing the Stress of Separation or Divorce* published in Ireland by the Family Support Agency's Family Mediation Service makes the following suggestions -

- Learn to relax – and you do have to learn this! There are special techniques to train people to relax
- Work off stress physically - physical activity is a terrific outlet.
- Talk to someone you really trust
- Be fair to yourself. Take responsibility for your own feelings and needs
- Its OK to cry if it makes you feel better
- Maintain a sense of perspective, try to avoid blowing issues out of all proportion
- Anger can be one of the strongest emotions. It is a normal response to a devastating blow. Allow yourself to be angry. Find acceptable outlets for anger and frustration. Scream into a pillow, run, walk, swim, hit a punching bag
- Avoid people who create anxiety. You can't be everything to everybody
- Try to think positively and don't allow yourself to focus on negative things
- Put aside some time for unwinding
- Get the balance right in being kind to yourself and others

***You need to meet your own needs as a person in order to continue to be an effective parent.***

Remember that all parents make mistakes, but if you have a good relationship with your child and she feels your love and acceptance, she will soon forget your mistakes and remember how much you care for her.

***Be kind to yourself and remember that there is no such thing as a perfect parent, child or family.***

Information on family mediation can be found in Chapter 5.



# Chapter 2



*Talking about your  
family situation*

In a family situation where one parent has never been known to the children, has left the household for whatever reason, or has not been seen for years, it is easy to assume that children just accept this situation, do not need to ask questions and are not interested in hearing about their other parent.

Children generally **do** want to know about both of their parents. They want to know what kind of a person the other parent is, their likes and dislikes, the kind of things they enjoy. Children need to understand their personal history and their place in the world and so build up a coherent sense of identity. They need to understand their lives as a coherent narrative to be able to give an account of themselves and their families. Without information on their other parent and their extended family, half of this history can be denied to them. *“Family history and family trees are important because they tell us where we have come from, the point of growth that we have reached, and with whom we are connected”.*

The bulk of research regarding children who live away from their parents (mainly in fostering and adoption situations) points to how important it is for children to know about the identity of their birth parents and this principle also applies to children whose parents do not live together. This does suggest that, insofar as children are concerned, they do need as much information as possible about both their parents. Sue Slipman, former Director of the National Council for One Parent Families in Britain says *“You have to think very long and hard about children’s rights. They all desperately want to know who the other parent is. Their security of identity is bound up with knowing which is the other bit that formed them”.*

***The importance of information about both parents  
to children cannot be over-emphasised***

**Be open to questions**

Your child will be asked questions about both her parents by others, especially other children, and she needs the necessary information to feel comfortable and confident to deal with this and be equipped with appropriate and relevant information.

It is important, therefore, that your child

- feels free to talk about her other parent,
- can ask questions and know that you can handle these without becoming upset yourself, and
- know that you can deal with queries as honestly and openly as possible in a calm way.

You may be defensive about your past relationship or your own behaviour, consciously or sub-consciously, but try not to block the questions – your child needs to know. Allow time for your child to talk and ask questions. And do make sure that you are listening!

Talking about the other parent does give children some kind of permission to love or like their other parents. They need to know that this is okay. Children can see themselves as being in a loyalty bind. They feel they are wronging one parent if they like the one who has gone away.

*Reassure her that it is alright to love  
or like both of you as parents.*

When your child asks about the other parent try to give her some private time with you to ask questions or just to talk. Talk about ordinary things such as *“Your Mam is quite tall with long brown hair”* or *“Your Dad supports Rovers”* or *“Daddy used to ride a bike”*. Show your child the places where you went together. *“Your Mam and I once went to the disco there”*. Talk about likes and dislikes. Point out similarities between your child and both parents. Tell funny stories about the early days of your relationship.

### **Always try to be truthful**

It is not wise to build a false picture of the other parent or of the relationship between that parent and child. A parent can invent explanations in an effort to protect her child. Often these invented explanations lead to more inventions, as the child asks more questions. It may seem easier and kinder to avoid the truth and to invent explanations such as *“Your Daddy is away in the Lebanon”*. There is always the fear here that other people may blurt out the truth - and they usually do!

A mother not married to her child's father may feel that there is no point in talking to the child about a father that she will never know. But one day, she will ask questions - she will realise that she does/must have another parent and will wonder why the other parent is not talked about.

Where a mother with a child marries a man who is not the father of her child and the child is too young to remember her father, it may feel easier to act as though they are all the biological family, especially if the birth father is totally absent. Indeed, many young couples in that situation would never think of themselves as a step-family. The child is brought up and thought of as their own, using the same surname with no access visits or maintenance arrangements to indicate otherwise. Just like adopted children, it can prove to be a devastating shock to children as they grow older to discover that they are not the biological children of both their parents. So if you have a new partner who is like a mother or father to your child, be truthful about the real situation, no matter how tempting it is to do otherwise i.e. that s/he is not your child's mother/father but has chosen to live with you and take on the parenting role.

If you live with your own parents and they are like parents to your child, be truthful about the real nature of the relationship i.e. that they are your child's grandparents.

#### **Maureen is twenty-five, her son David is six:**

*"David's Dad was in the Air Corps. He looked great in his uniform and we had some great times together. When I told him I was pregnant he wanted me to have an abortion because I just wasn't sure I loved him enough to get married. Soon after he was posted abroad. He wrote to me a couple of times and I kept the letters and a photo he'd given to me. I stay with my parents, so my father is like a Dad to David. He knows about his real Dad though, because I showed him the photo from when he was little. A few weeks ago, I heard David's pal asking why he didn't have a Dad. David told him 'I do have a Dad. He flies airplanes'. It didn't seem to bother him, and his friend just stuck out his arms and started rushing around pretending to be a plane! I couldn't help laughing, but at the same time, I felt proud of David and pleased that I'd been able to explain things truthfully to him".*

Parents who have started with honest information are often surprised and reassured by how well children can cope with confusing situations. That is not to say that it always works well but at least you get off to a good start.

*Children have a great ability and capacity to deal with the truth, when it is gently and supportively shared with them.*

### **Saint or Monster?**

Remember, though, that if you only talk about the good things about your child's other parent your child is likely to grow up believing her parent is a saint-like person, an impossible person to replace or try to be like. On the other hand if you only recall bad things, your child's other parent turns into a monster in your child's eyes, someone she is ashamed of, someone to keep quiet about. If you are very bitter about your child's other parent there can be a temptation to belittle and undermine her/him. You can feel badly let down as a result of the outcome of your relationship and sometimes cannot hide your anger and only discuss the negative qualities of your child's other parent. This is very detrimental to your child's identity and self-esteem.

Children are sensitive and are often quick to turn adult comments into a negative about themselves. If you paint a picture of the other parent as 'bad' and living with them as a 'mistake' then your child may interpret this as part of herself being bad and a mistake. It is only a short step for a child hearing "*Your Dad is bad*" to an interpretation that "*I am bad*". Sometimes we forget that a person can have failings as a partner and still be a good parent.

To avoid these extremes, you may decide it is best to forget the other parent. But your child may then invent her own special version of her missing parent, so you need to find the middle ground between the 'saint' and the 'monster' that provides your child with a realistic picture.

### **Children want to know about their family situation**

Parents often find it difficult to explain how their family situation came about. Whatever the situation, children do need to be told as much as possible about their other parent, about what has happened and why. They need to know that they can ask questions, that they will be listened to, and that they will get an answer.

It is also important to talk about members of the family of the other parent. After all, they too are related to the children and they will have a curiosity about their relatives too.

You do not have to keep reminding your child of her other parent. From time to time you can mention a passing memory, and occasionally you may feel it is important to have a longer discussion.

### **Try to give both sides of the story in a positive way**

*“Your children only have one father and he cannot be replaced. You should in no way, openly or covertly, try to deprive a child of its father. You should in no way try to persuade a child that its father is a double-dyed villain or rat”. Futurewoman.*

It is difficult to be fair to your child’s other parent if you feel very bitter and angry. It can be especially difficult if your partner was violent, criminal, promiscuous, alcoholic or mentally ill.

If you can understand the behaviour of your child’s other parent, you can usually help your child to understand it too. One mother tried by saying *“Your Dad bottled up all his feelings, then, if he got drunk, he sometimes exploded. He didn’t really know what he was doing...”*

A mother, whose boy-friend had disappeared as soon as he learnt she was pregnant, told her child *“Your Dad wasn’t ready to settle down. He wasn’t sure he loved me in the right way to live with me all the time. I think he was frightened”.*

One father told his children *“Your mum was very young when we had you. We didn’t have much money and couldn’t find a nice house. It was hard. After a few years she felt she’d missed out on lots of fun, so she started going to dances, that’s how she met Frank.”*

Try to remember the best parts of your relationship and share these with your children.

***If it is very difficult for you to be positive about your children’s other parent, try not to be negative - be neutral.***

For example, you could describe the appearance of your child’s other parent as well as any interests or activities s/he may have had, the other members of the family etc.

Perhaps your child could hear the story from both sides. It may be possible for both parents to discuss with each other how to explain the situation to your child and actually share the telling.

***It is essential to be truthful in giving information about your child's other parent and about why s/he does not live with you.***

**If you make a mistake, try to rectify it as soon as possible**

It is very easy to get caught off guard by an unexpected question from your child. Such questions often provoke 'easy' rather than 'truthful' replies. When you realise what has happened, before the situation gets out of hand, find or create an opportunity for giving your child the correct information in a gentle way.

Liz was eighteen and unmarried when Aoife was born. She is now married to Sean and they have a four year old son Andrew:

*"At the beginning I made up my mind I would tell Aoife about her Dad as soon as she was old enough to understand, but that was easier said than done. She was only two when Sean and I got married, so she doesn't remember the time when Sean wasn't around. She took to him so easily and I was afraid it might upset her if she knew the truth. I remember one day when Andrew was about a year old, she asked me 'How is it that he has black hair and I have red hair?' That would have been a good time to tell her I suppose, but we were on the bus at the time, and we just glossed over it.*

Recently, she came running in from school crying. She went straight to Sean and said *"Niamh says you are not really my Dad"*. There was nothing for it but to tell her then, but she was too upset to take it all in at once. Every so often she will ask me to tell her about it again, so I am sure she will come to accept it in the end. I'm only sorry that she had to find out in such a cruel way while in the playground".

**Use and create opportunities for telling**

While you must respond to questions your child asks, sometimes you can create the opportunities yourself. It is not necessary to wait for direct questions. Not all children ask questions - a child who does not ask about her father may miss him just as keenly as one who does. Show your child a photograph of the other parent as a starting point, or you might use a children's story in which one of the characters lives with one parent alone as a way of introducing the child to an understanding of her own family set-up.

*“Look Peter Rabbit lives with his Mam and his Dad is away”*. News items can also provide opportunities to tell a child about her origins. You may also be able to pick up a theme from a television programme and give your child a chance to talk about the different kinds of relationships she sees around her. This might give her a chance to air anything that is puzzling her.

Put together photographs and details of important events in a ‘Life Story Book’ for your child and include a photograph of the other parent.

You could keep a special box, large envelope or scrapbook for photos, letters and other reminders of their child’s other parent. She may enjoy looking through these collections. A photo of a parent a child has never seen, or cannot remember, can be especially important.

### **Try to fit your explanation to your child’s age**

**Very young children** are often the easiest group to talk to and are usually satisfied with a simple explanation. They treat information in a matter-of-fact way and opportunities to talk about the other parent arise naturally in day-to-day events. The **five to ten year olds** are also a relatively easy group to talk to and assuming some information has been given at an earlier stage, this is a good time to fill in more details about the other parent - age, appearance, health, interests and education, information on the other members of the family, etc. This information is considered important to have available and can gradually be given to children over time.

**Older children** will probably need to know more about why a marriage did not take place or broke down, how you felt you no longer loved their other parent or why the other parent no longer loved you.

If you were in a short-term relationship maybe it would be most honest to say *“We didn’t love each other enough to marry and we knew we would be unhappy together in the long run”*.

If you are separated, maybe it would be truthful to say *“We used to love each other a lot, but we both changed. We found we did not like the same things any more and were often quarrelling. We thought we would be happier if we lived in different houses”*.

If the other parent has gone on to another relationship, explain that s/he now loves someone else but that s/he still loves your child. This can be a difficult situation as you will probably feel a great deal of anger towards your child’s other parent and find it difficult to talk about the new relationship or the other parent in any positive way.



**Teenage children** are likely to need still more detailed explanations and information. It is very important for them to understand their origins and their place in society. It is at this stage that they are looking more objectively and more critically at the world about them, at parents in particular, and seeking to establish a separate identity, to find answers to the *"Who am I"* question. At this stage you and your child may find it difficult and embarrassing to talk freely.

Teenagers in two parent households are normally critical of their parents, so don't be surprised if you find yourself or your child's other parent being criticised by your teenager. It helps if you can discuss the situation openly so your teenager can understand your feelings and behaviour and those of the other parent. Sometimes you have to admit mistakes - *"Yes, I did nag too much"*. The worries, criticisms and questions of teenagers need to be taken seriously and again, honesty is the best policy.

Teenagers may wonder a lot about parents' feelings, and they can ask very direct and sometimes painful questions, such as *"Why did you not marry Dad?"* or *"Why did you and Dad get so mad with each other?"*

### **Children can go on asking the same questions in different ways.**

This gives you the chance to tell your story again and in different ways and may help to clarify any misunderstandings your child may have. What satisfies one child at one time in her life will not satisfy another. There is a thirst to know and this is sometimes hard to quench when the questions are asked in an oblique way or perhaps signalled by bad behaviour or a psychosomatic symptom. An irritating cough, possibly years later, can herald the arrival of yet another phase in the questioning, and questions and answers need to be explored. As the questions change, so the answers will have to be updated. As time goes by, the way you look back at events will also have changed and this will be reflected in your replies. In later years your own feelings will not be so near the surface and therefore you can choose what it is appropriate to say and what should not be discussed with your child.

The story of your relationship break-up or how you became a single parent may have to be retold as your child gets older and considers life more maturely. Though it would be unfortunate to present your family situation as a tragedy and either party as a martyr, it would be a pity also to pretend there are no regrets and that your situation is so common it hardly matters.

### **Difficult situations**

Some family situations have additional difficulties. For instance, a mother who is not married to the father of her child may never have told the man concerned that she became pregnant and she can no longer contact him. In situations where the best efforts to locate the father are fruitless, then the child may have to come to terms with the fact that she is never going to know anything about her Dad. Talking this situation through may help, and if mother has come to terms with it, then it is likely that the child will too.

In other situations, for example where a woman has been raped or the child is the result of IVF or of incest, the issue is extremely sensitive and complex. This will be difficult not only for the child but for the mother too. The mother may want to deal with this herself or may prefer to contact an expert for advice and counselling.

### ***Telling other people***

Most relatives and friends will want to help and so will people like teachers, the clergy, youth workers and club leaders. Sometimes the most valuable help comes from other single parents or their children.

It is essential that you inform anyone who regularly comes in contact with your child about your family status. Other people will be able to help better if they know what you have told your child about the other parent. For instance, you may need to explain to your relatives that you want your child to know good things about her other parent as well as bad. You might tell a teacher that your child's mother has left you and they have no contact, so that when other children in the class make cards for Mothers Day, the teacher can quietly encourage your child to make one for a favourite aunt. You might let the play-group leader know that your child's father is not living with you and that he worked as a lorry driver. Then, if your child starts inventing a Dad who lives at home and is a garda, the play-group leader can correct the story and back up what you have told your child.

Other people will feel more comfortable about your situation if you can be relaxed when talking about it. If you are unapologetic and open about your new status you will elicit respect rather than misplaced sympathy or hostility. Some people can feel very embarrassed when the conversation turns to marriage, families, husbands or wives in the company of unmarried or separated parents. Children are often aware of this awkwardness and can feel there's something wrong with their living arrangements. You can reassure your child that there are many kinds of families, most of which are

beneficial to children. However, one of the best ways to overcome the awkward atmosphere is for you to find ways of talking about your present situation in a relaxed and natural way to your child and those around your family. Other people often do not know how to help, so let them know what they can do.

### **Get help when you feel stuck**

It would be easy to say *“Follow these suggestions and all will be well”*. However, life is rarely so straightforward. If you find it difficult to explain things to your child, for whatever reason, it may help to talk to a relative or close friend. There may be occasions when you may need professional help and don't be afraid or shy about asking for it.

**Ask**, if appropriate, the other parent to help work out a plan with you telling your child about her family situation.

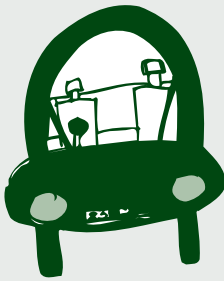
**Ask**, if you need someone to help you decide what to tell your child about the other parent and if you need help finding the right words.

**Ask**, if you think someone else could explain things more easily to your child.

**Ask**, even if you just want someone to listen to you, for you often find you can sort out your muddled feelings and ideas by talking about them to a good listener.

If you need advice from outsiders, such as a social worker, advice worker, or counsellor, contact one of the organisations listed at the back of this book.





## *Shared Parenting*

## The importance of both parents to children

**P**arents are the most important people in the world for most children. Parents connect us to our past and provide some coherence and continuity through the many changes life demands of us. As children we look to parents to be always there for us.

One mother commented:

*"I've always felt very strongly that Andrew is the children's Dad - there is no one else who will ever take that place. It's such an important relationship, one that you have to put masses of energy into if you're living in two different places."*

***It's not adding people to children's lives that is difficult.  
It is taking important people away from them.***

Children who seem to do best where their parents are not living together are those whose parents

- spend time with them
- make them feel loved and wanted in each home
- keep the children away from the parents' disagreements and
- allow the children independent relationships with each of them.

When children do not have to worry that their relationship with a parent is dependent on how well the two parents are getting along, they can feel free to love them both without a conflict of loyalty, to have access to each of them without fear of losing either. The continuing connection between children and both parents is essential to their well-being, as well as being a stabilising factor in a time of change.

***Remember that when you support your child's relationship with the other parent, you are promoting your child's healthy adjustment and your child's right to an independent and meaningful relationship with each parent.***

### **About shared parenting**

You are not alone if you find it difficult to think about the subject of shared parenting. It raises many practical problems and can reopen emotional wounds (which may need to be dealt with). Establishing a parenting relationship with an ex-partner can be a serious challenge, especially where conflict is high. As you are now no longer partners, or perhaps never were, a new co-operative, parenting relationship must be developed, so that you can continue your role as parents of your children. Sometimes a parent may need encouragement, support or even insistence that s/he continues to keep in touch.

***Children need both parents and some parents may need reminding about this.***

Shared parenting does require a certain amount of understanding and genuine care for the best interest of your child. It allows each parent to have some share in the parenting and it also requires you to allow space for your child and the other parent to develop a relationship over which you have no control - to establish a 'real' parenting relationship with the child. This can be very challenging and requires a lot of trust between parents.

***Remember that the bottom line is that you both love your child.***

In *"Mom's House, Dad's House - making shared custody work, how parents can make two homes for their children after divorce"*, family counsellor and divorced parent Isolina Ricci makes a compelling case for the concept of shared parenting. She presents a practical and systematic guide for parents which shows them how to build two homes for their children following the ending of a relationship, even where the parents are not on friendly terms with each other. It presents a new way of reorganising family life. Instead of the old formula where one parent has custody and the other visiting rights the idea centres around the concept of the original home dividing and multiplying like a living cell into two new families. Each parent feels that s/he is heading a family and the child feels loved and a happy member of each.

The concept of 'broken home' becomes obsolete and is replaced by the two-home concept for children. The two homes under separate parental authority give children time with each parent and the security of the agreement between them.

***Two real homes with no fighting does not happen overnight. It takes work, sweat and tears. But it's worth the effort!***

***There are some issues which you may need to think about:***

**Are children confused if there are two homes?**

Some parents feel it is too confusing for children to understand the situation where both parents are not living together and perhaps new relationships have been formed within the household. But it is quite possible for even fairly young children to understand what is happening. Children can accept the fact that they have two homes and can feel very cherished by both parents.

Children can and do demonstrate their ability to adapt to different authorities, different rules in different settings. They follow different rules at school, in sports, after school classes etc. They live in a fast-paced pluralistic world where rules change with settings. They can, and do, adapt to different rules in two different family settings. Sometimes adults are not so adaptable!

**Establishing boundaries**

One of the most important rules around shared parenting is that you delineate and maintain your separate territories, courteously and firmly. And keep your nose out of the other parent's territory as well.

This principle of non-interference can strengthen the parent-child relationship, enhance the emotional climate of family life and children see a new, different, but still united front from their parents. Non-interference is the workable way to respect your partner in parenting and to share authority and responsibility.

**Be wary of old scars**

Probably the biggest problem of all is the fact that old scars and difficulties between you both keep opening up and hurting. You may both still want to shout, scream, blame and fight and plead with each other, but try very hard not to let these problems interfere with your child's arrangements. One parent commented: *"It sounds like a cliché, but we stuck to putting the kids first. We were determined that they would never come into the firing line. Working out the arrangements came down to negotiation and practicalities - you have to behave like adults"*.

Another parent adds: *"The children have to come first. You can't be selfish and think I'm alright, it's a shame about the kids but that's too bad"*.



The presence of conflict between parents can cause the connection between children and one of their parents to cease.

Conflict between parents is very distressing for children, especially at handover time. As one parent said: *“Keep the children firmly in focus, never be petty and don’t expect things to be perfect.”*

***Managing conflict is crucial in continuing the connection between both parents and their children.***

### **Opposition from the other parent**

Many parents express helplessness in overcoming the other parent’s opposition to their contact or desire for shared parenting. Guilt about the separation or continued anger about the break-up can compound the problem. If the resentment of the other parent is a continual barrier, perhaps professional counselling can point the way to a trial parenting agreement. The unfinished business of the past should be put to rest for all concerned. The change, when it works, is worth the time and the effort but often requires a lot of persistence over time.

### **There are some things you cannot control in shared parenting**

What you do in your own home, and how you parent your child there, is your business. When your child is living with you, you have authority and responsibility. When your child is with her other parent s/he is responsible for her and that means s/he can take whatever steps s/he believes to be necessary in the best interest of your child. For example your child may have a different bedtime or type of diet when she is away from your home. The more divergent the standards are, and the more critical one family is of the other, the more the young person will feel caught up in the problem of divided loyalties. Parents and step-parents can play a part in minimising these difficulties for children by showing some understanding of the young person’s position, by working to keep communication open, and by avoiding at all costs the feeling of conflict between the two homes. If there are major differences make time to discuss them when your child is not around.

You need to be able to trust the other parent that s/he will take care of your child. You may need to come to terms with the fact that you no longer have a say in everything that happens in your child’s life.

It is important to allow for different house rules, different parenting, and different ways of relating to the children.

It is helpful when both adults and children are open to the idea that different ways of doing things can be fine, so that there is not the choice of this or that (exclusive) but this and that (inclusive).

There can be occasions where you are concerned about your child's safety when she is with the other parent. You need to decide whether the child is really in danger or whether your fears have been magnified by your emotional state. You might, for example, be still very angry with the other parent and your anger may surface as unreasonable expectations of the other parent. Check with a relative or friend or even a health professional that you have good cause for concern regarding your child's safety and if you do, report the matter to your local health centre. However, if you find that you child is not in real danger, then allow the other parent room to parent in her/his own way and to make her/his own mistakes.

### ***All parents make mistakes***

#### **How to arrange shared parenting**

By and large, the best and the most acceptable agreement on matters concerning the children and their welfare is the one reached by the parents themselves. As one mother said: *"I figured if I didn't make these decisions (about parenting) with him someone else would do it for me. And that someone else just can't know me or my situation as well as I do."* Apart from this being in the children's best interest, the parents can save themselves the uncertainty of court hearings and the associated costs of these proceedings or other legal fees. Court hearings promote competition rather than co-operation between parents and this is not a useful model for children to observe.

As one mother put it: *"The greatest disappointment of the first months following the end of our relationship was the realisation that – like it or not – I had to relate to the children's father. I had wanted him out of my life completely. I never wanted to see him or hear his voice again. But, when you have children together, that is not the way it works."* Another mother said that the moment they stopped being a couple their relationship was no longer about them... what was left was the fact that they were parents of children they both adored.

Evidence suggests that when parents have a flexible, co-operative sharing of responsibility, it provides the children with the best model of parental behaviour which has a good influence on the emotional adjustment and development of their children. Think about what it will mean to your child as

she observes her parents learning how to work together, despite feelings of anger and disappointment. You can teach your child by example how to devise an effective working relationship without sacrificing personal integrity.

The better parents can work together, the fewer the areas of uncertainty. For children security comes from consistency in the way they are loved and disciplined and parents being available for them even if from separate homes. This can make even dramatic change manageable for them.

If parents can agree that both parents - even part-time - are of importance and value for children's well-being, this can help both of them to find ways of making and keeping a place for both parents in the lives of their children. Most parents love their children dearly and want to see them as much as possible. The success or failure of shared parenting very often hinges on how both parents manage the practicalities and how they cope with their own and their children's emotional issues. Tend well to the detail (recognise that arguments about socks are not really about socks), do what you say you will do, and try to build up some level of trust with your child's other parent. Keep your own emotional issues separate from the practicalities of shared parenting and get help to deal with difficult issues if necessary.

Give yourself and each other plenty of time and space to sort things out and try not to look for neat, instant solutions. Try to find a good time and place - comfortable and possibly belonging to neither of you - to work out parenting arrangements. Give yourselves plenty of time away from your child. Allow yourselves time to swap good news about your child as well as sorting out difficulties. Whatever you do, do not try to negotiate arrangements on the doorstep when handing your child over.

Bear in mind that it can be very difficult to retreat from your former relationship as a mate while at the same time develop a civil working or business relationship regarding your role as parent. A significant factor is how well parents have dealt with the complex emotions of separation or of having become an unmarried parent: grief, loss, guilt and anger. It is important to work through these feelings about your situation so that negotiations on shared parenting can proceed.

A working relationship should allow parents to communicate, make plans, control their feelings and help them carry out one of the most important jobs anyone ever undertakes - rearing children. Parent-to-parent interaction is not expected to be especially cordial but it should be workable. Remember the characteristics of an acquaintance or business relationship: courteous, relatively formal, low-keyed and public. Be prepared to work at making things work.

***Be positive, helpful, supportive and co-operative with the other parent.***

Once it is clear that both parents are going to stay involved with the children through organised contact and a working relationship is formed between them about sorting out parenting issues, both parents then face the ongoing challenge of being directly involved with the children.

One of the emotional tasks for parents in shared parenting is mustering the motivation and energy to take on a 'single parent' role when spending time with children and to find new ways of being involved with their children. Despite the fact that shared parenting has become more common, this kind of parenting is a role which is unclear and unexpected for most parents.

***The energy and stamina required for shared parenting can be great.***

Many parents do master the struggle and are rewarded by good relationships that benefit the children and both parents.

**Good Communication**

In entering a new working relationship with your child's other parent the way you both communicate is crucially important. Very often it isn't what is said, but the way it is said that causes the trouble between parents.

**Tips for good communication:**

1. Direct communication is the best mode of communication. Do not ask your child, or anyone else, to carry your messages, verbally or in written form.
2. If you are having a meeting plan the meeting in advance. Agree on the items that need to be discussed and know what decisions need to be agreed by the end of it.

3. Ask for what you want – no-one is that psychic that they can guess what you would like to happen!
4. Listen carefully to the other parent and clarify what is being requested if you do not fully understand.
5. Do not make assumptions. Make everything explicit.
6. Be prepared to give and take.
7. Discuss items which are easiest first and those which are hardest last.
8. At the end of any discussion repeat what has been agreed so as there is no misunderstanding. Write it down if necessary.
9. Focus on words, not feelings. Keep your feelings in check.
10. Come to agreements you can live with (or are willing to try) for two or three months at a time. Plan a time to meet again, check how the arrangements are working for your child and for the parents and then re-negotiate any problem areas.
11. Don't take the other parent for granted. This can lead to a disrespect which can rapidly lead to trouble. Show common courtesy and respect even when you don't feel s/he deserves it or needs it.
12. Know what it is about the other parent that annoys you, be ready to side-step the annoyance and get on with the business of sorting out arrangements regarding your child.
13. Keep your personal life to yourself and your normal curiosity within bounds.
14. Return any phone calls, don't be late for appointments and keep any agreements reached.
15. Be patient in making arrangements and negotiating the shared parenting of your child. It can take time for both of you to be ready and willing to discuss the arrangements without losing the head! Good negotiations take time.

***Don't give up just because the going gets tough!***

### **Making a parenting plan**

The Family Support Agency's Family Mediation Service has produced a very useful set of leaflets for parents who want to make a parenting plan. They state: *"A parenting plan is a carefully devised schedule which lays out how to share time with the children, how to manage responsibilities, and how to make decisions about the children."*

School arrangements, child care, holidays, pocket money can all be part of a parenting plan. A parenting plan provides a structure so everyone is clear about future living arrangements. Clearly agreed plans help to reduce conflict. Here are some suggested headings for discussion (you may want to add some and ignore some):

**Homes** - where and with whom your child is going to sleep, eat, keep their things, play, do their homework and share their personal and everyday experiences.

Children can come to feel at home in two places and some do spend half their time with one parent and half with the other. But practicalities of time and place usually mean that they spend more weekday time in one place rather than the other. Both parents need to take care that each becomes and remains a real parent rather than one a disciplinarian and the other only providing a good time.

***In other words, both homes need to be fully functioning homes, not one home where children work and another where they play.***

**Time** - when and how long your child is going to be with each of you. Children and parents need a block of unbroken time together. This means time spent overnight, not just a few hours during the day.

Just how parents divide time with the children is very much up to the parents themselves. The needs of your child should dictate your decisions, but of course where both parents live will also have an impact. If one parent lives in Dublin and the other in Donegal then that is different to parents living in the same town.

**Grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins** - how your child is to keep in touch with her relations. Family history and traditions are important and your child needs to retain contact with the wider family. She should not have to lose anyone just because you have separated.

**New partners** - if either of you has a new partner that person will become part of your child's everyday world and the part s/he takes needs to be discussed so that any fears or anxieties are identified and common sense prevails. See chapter 4.

**Money** - how the costs of your child's daily life can be met so that, even if everyone is worse off financially, your child is protected from hardship and reductions in their opportunities as far as possible.

**Clothes, toys and special possessions, including pets** - who buys them, where they are, who keeps track of them.

**Doctor, dentist, teachers, sports/youth activities, etc.** - who they are, where they are, who takes your child, picks her up, gets the reports, pays for activities, who goes to parents' meetings and evenings, who decides about school functions and trips etc.

It is up to each parent her/himself to initiate and maintain communication with anyone with whom her/his child is involved. Teachers, doctors, youth-club leaders, church clergy may not be aware of the separate involvement of both parents in a child's life. They will need to be fully informed about the reality of your child's life and will need clear direction as to who delivers and collects your child, gets what report, notices of meetings, concerts etc.

**Birthdays and special days** - where they are spent, who organises them. Days that you think should be happy e.g. birthdays etc. may be extremely painful if your child is wanting to be with both parents and can't. Thinking and talking about events and how different situations will be managed beforehand is the first step towards understanding, negotiating and finding the unique way forward for your particular family.

The tone of celebratory days is set by the respect of parents for one another and their separate relationships with their child. This mutual respect will give guests and friends a sense of security and guide their own behaviour. It also means that friends and relatives do not have to take sides.

**Communication** - You need to be able to get in touch with each other fairly easily. Set up ways of doing this.

**Cancellations and emergencies** - what system you will have for not making a drama out of a crisis! Have plans to fall back on if a crisis arises.

If you have difficulty reaching some decisions you may need to find a middle way where one or both of you must give in a little. You will need a lot of talking and much common sense. Do try and keep the focus on your child, talk about what you want for her and what you can each realistically offer to do. As one parent put it *"All the arrangements were made with the children in mind. We both agreed on that. After all, contact is for the children, not for the parents."*

### ***If you are finding difficulty in reaching agreement ask***

*"What does our child need?"*

*"What does she want from each of us?"*

*"What would she like us to arrange for her?"*

*"What do we think therefore that we should try to arrange?"*

### **Consultation with children**

While arrangements for children are best made by their parents, children do want to be consulted and involved in decisions that will affect their lives. As children get older they will be able to have more of a say about what happens in their lives. Children should not be burdened with decisions such as *"Who do you want to live with?"* as they do not generally want the responsibility of actually making the decisions. However, they do want their parents to respect their needs sufficiently to talk to them, and to explain what is happening and to listen to their views.

You might consider making provisional decisions and then consulting your child about them. If you do this she will soon tell you if your suggestions do not suit her plans. But remember that the final decisions rest with both parents.

Studies show that children who divide their time between two households are more likely to have positive feelings about moving between households if they had an active role in decisions about these arrangements and were able to talk to parents about their problems concerning their 'divided' lives.

### **...and new partners**

If either parent has a new partner s/he is likely to have some parenting responsibilities on a day-to-day or occasional basis, even if not holding legal parental responsibility. Step-parents therefore could be consulted about the arrangements even if not directly involved in the actual decision making.



Children can accommodate and cope with two parents who are not living together and the introduction of one or two step-parents. But it is much easier for them to do this and to accept two differing regimes if both parents can also accept that a new adult has a clear and defined role in the lives of the children. Try to discuss any problems which may arise with your child.

### **Benefits of a parenting plan:**

The Family Support Agency's Family Mediation Service leaflet outlines the benefits for parents of a parenting plan:

- It helps parents to communicate about when it is important to contact each other and discuss issues around childrearing
- Each parent gets time off
- Children will be less likely to play one parent off against the other
- Children can love both parents without feeling disloyal and can identify with the good qualities of each parent

If your feelings are getting in the way and you cannot agree on arrangements you may need the help of a mediator who can assist you in reaching your own agreement. Mediation can only work if both parents are willing to negotiate and genuinely wish to arrive at a solution which is in the best interest of the child (see Chapter 5). If mediation does not work it may be necessary to go to Court where decisions will be imposed (see Chapter 6).

### **Practical pointers in shared parenting:**

#### **Children need information**

For the arrangements to work children should know what the arrangements are and that they are reliable. Changes or cancellations should be explained to your child well in advance. Many children count the days from one visit or phone call to the next and are bitterly disappointed and angry when nothing happens as agreed or promised. If you can't do what you promised then let your child know, don't leave her waiting and wondering whether you've forgotten her or just don't care anymore. It is important that the parent making the change takes responsibility for explaining it to the child where possible. The other parent should not be left to make excuses which may cause resentment. The children will soon realise that they are not being told the full story.

If children are informed about what is happening and a businesslike communication with the other parent can be built, then children can learn to cope.

You may need to give your child “permission” to be with the other parent, that is, re-assure your child that she is not being disloyal to you by seeing the other parent.

Often it is the adults in the situation who are giving out messages of non-acceptance of the situation which, of course, the children absorb like sponges. Generally if the adults can live with and accept the new living arrangements then the children do too.

Adults need to allow children the flexibility to move in and out of the different families they belong to and support them to feel that difference can be a positive thing.

### **Time-keeping**

Have your child ready on time and don't be late picking her up or returning her to the other parent. If one parent has a problem with being on time then this should be explained to the child. If children are late being picked up or left back they can become tense, fractious and upset - as can the parents.

### **Plan the beginning and end of a handover carefully**

Everyone is usually on edge at these times and arrangements can sometimes be abandoned altogether because feelings are so strong. One father explained *“I told her not to come anymore because the children got so upset”*, while another father said *“I couldn't bear to continue seeing them. I felt like a stranger in the house when I collected the children. They cried when I left and that started me off. It was awful”*.

Some parents can stop parenting or visit less frequently because their children cried when they left them. In extreme cases parents see the ‘clean break’ as better for children so the children can ‘get over’ one of their parents.

This is the emotional anguish that can arise at the beginning and ending of contact with the repeated experience of separation. We all need to realise and recognise that these things do happen. This distress is sometimes interpreted by one parent as a sign that children do not want to see the other parent, whereas it more likely means that the children find it hard leaving one for the other. It is no fun saying good-bye for a whole week or longer.

Both parents must prepare the children physically and emotionally for the transition to be with the other parent. Try to make greetings and goodbyes as polite and pleasant as possible. Plan the timing of the arrangements carefully. See that your child has everything she needs and be gentle but firm with her.

Children may need time on return home to re-adjust in moving from one home to another. They may need time on their own to do this. Both parents should make every effort to discuss any issues children have and to agree with each other and with the children on ways of dealing with them.

Looking forward to the next visit is better than remembering the parting. You cannot mend the past, but you can help to plan the future by getting your child to look forward to the next visit.

It is important that neither parent verbally or physically attacks the other parent in the presence of the children, who may afterwards feel that the attack was meant for them. Research has shown that children who experience conflict between their parents at times of handover often feel that they are the cause of the argument and may feel responsible. This can be very stressful for the children. Some children may even try to stop the conflict by stating that they do not wish to see one of their parents. If parents show mutual respect for each other they are far more likely to gain and keep the respect of their children.

***Bite your tongue, stitch up your lips, but don't argue in front of the children.***

If it is difficult to cope with the beginning and end of changeover, arrange for it to happen on neutral territory and, if necessary with a third party - a friend or relative, perhaps grandparents.

If you are in the initial stages of a new relationship don't bring a new partner with you. Your time with your child is limited but precious.

**...and the time in between as well**

While it may be useful to plan your time with your child and do some things with them like swimming or shopping, there is no need to fill up all the time.

***Just messing about and talking - just wasting time together can be very satisfying and very important.***

It is not necessarily what you do that counts but how you do it. Doing it well, having a good relationship with your child and a workable arrangement for yourselves makes all the difference.

Most parents want to establish a 'real' relationship with children, so they are not seen as kindly, treat-bestowing relatives. Go for quality rather than quantity in keeping in touch with your children.

**Try to be patient about visits which are treats from beginning to end.**

For parents who spend a small amount of time with their children (for whatever reason) it can be easy to go the 'treat' route to over-compensate for the short time. However, the idea behind spending time with the other parent is to help maintain a relationship as near as possible to 'normal'. It should therefore be set up to facilitate and maintain an easy relationship. However, this does not always happen and it can be maddening when children are showered with sweets, toys and outings during these times especially if you hardly have enough money to pay the rent. If you can, talk to the other parent and you may be able to sort something out. But try also to put yourself in their place -

S/he has very limited time in which to keep the relationship with the child alive.

S/he is probably very fond of her/his child and wants to be loved by her.

S/he may feel guilty about leaving the child when the partnership broke down.

S/he may feel regret that the child is not part of an 'ideal' family – two parents, married with children.

Looked at in this way, it is understandable that your child's other parent will want to make time together special treat times.

**Do not demand or allow tale-telling!**

It is important not to involve your child as a messenger, tale carrier, informant, or accomplice. When your child returns to you it is important to show an interest in what she has been doing. However, don't expect your child to be a spy in the other camp, bringing back secrets as this can be a heavy burden for a child. Trust the other parent to do the same. Its hard not to cross-examine your child after a visit but she will probably only tell you what you want to hear anyway! Several research studies have highlighted

that a barrage of questions and grilling for information is often done by both parents on return from the other parent and is particularly hated by the children. They are questioned while they are out with one parent, then again when they return to the other parent. If either of you do this, your child will soon realise what is going on and will either keep quiet to protect the other parent or begin to play one parent off against the other.

Children will be much happier moving between households if the parents both show that they respect the other's time with the children and show a positive interest in what the children have gained from the visit.

Minor complaints which your child reports are best played down. Children will try to test parents by comments like *"Mommy lets us stay up late"* or *"We don't have to eat vegetables at Dad's"*. If necessary go directly to the other parent for information if you need to and don't give out about the other parent in your child's presence.

If your child is angry with the other parent do not participate in her angry feelings about her other parent. Let her blow off steam but don't add water to the boiler, even though at that moment you might want to. Encourage your child to speak about any difficulties she may have with her other parent to that parent, and decline to give advice. Suggest the names of close friends if she needs to talk things out. Children need adults who are safe to confide in.

### **Exchange information about what is happening in the children's lives**

Pass on relevant and useful information to the other parent on issues affecting your child. Keep each other informed of any changes in your child's needs, anxieties and new skills e.g. a new fear of the dark, bedtime changes or now being able to tie shoelaces etc. Discuss your child's schooling and behaviour.

Decide which (or both) of you will go to events for parents, such as school open days, carol concerts, and football matches. You may not want to attend these events together, but sometimes you can go at different times or take turns. Leaving it to chance can be upsetting for children.

*What matters most is that someone is watching, applauding, listening to their talk, meeting their friends, and sharing the day with them as well as sharing the part they play in it.*

## **Belonging**

Children need to feel at home by having their place in the family acknowledged. Having your child's current favourite breakfast cereal and her own toothbrush in the bathroom is a sign that she belongs rather than merely passing through like a visitor. While it may not be possible for her to have a room of her own, having a single shelf, a drawer, or a box for a few games, books or clothes that are just for her can be important in establishing that a part of the other parent's home is open and available for her. The amount of time spent there doesn't matter but the sense of belonging does.

***Children will know they belong when they no longer need a suitcase to go from one home to another.***

As one mediator put it: *"An important point often raised is the involvement of the children ...in creating 'mum's home' and 'dad's home'. It is vital to have their significant objects in place - the duvet, the teddy, the things that go to make a home"*.

### **What if the children do not want to go to the other parent?**

Children can be reluctant to go to the other home or are unhappy when they return. Sometimes teenagers say they are too busy or that they don't want to be there as it's no fun.

Tune into your child and see why she may not want to be with her other parent. Children are sometimes reluctant to go to a parent's home because they will have to share him or her with a friend, a lover, or a job. It hurts to miss a parent when apart only to find that when together, someone or something else is playing the leading role.

Try to work together to understand what is upsetting your child. Don't take sides or blame each other and don't over-react. You may need to re-negotiate part of your schedule. If the level of distress for your child is serious then counselling for your child and both parents may be helpful.

### **Allow the other parent to help you out at times.**

S/he could help by looking after your child when you are ill, want an evening out or by having her when she is off school, even if it is not their time to have her. It can be difficult to accept help from someone you are not particularly fond of. It can take some generosity to allow the other parent to be generous to you!

### Who to tell.

Where you are involved in shared parenting then it is worth bearing in mind that some other people need to know this. For example teachers will need to be aware who collects your child from school or that your child is spending weekends with her other parent as it may account for her withdrawn or disruptive behaviour on a Friday or a Monday as she adjusts to the comings and goings. Teachers should also know who should and should not see your child or be told or consulted about school matters. If your child is attending out of school activities the people in charge will also need to know who to contact first at times of emergency or for parental consent.

Some parents feel reluctant to reveal details of the family's private affairs to a stranger. However, children need all the support and understanding available. It is wise, if at all possible, to tell the teacher about the family situation because a caring teacher can in many ways make sure the child is happily busy and be on hand to provide support, advice and reassurance.

One teacher said: *"I have children in my class with tremendous difficulty in accepting the situation, and their part in it. They become unable to concentrate on work that they had previously been enjoying."* Her experiences led her to believe that parents get caught up in their problems and do not recognise that those around them have problems too. This teacher said that she does not need to know everything, but does need to be kept in the picture. Then she can take the necessary steps to help the children in her class to cope with their situations as well as possible.

### Be flexible

Over time the pattern of contact may change as circumstances change. Your child may become involved in activities which clash with current arrangements. On the other hand most teenagers are likely not to want to spend a Saturday afternoon with either parent. Then new arrangements need to be tried which can keep the relationship between your child and both of you alive, so both of you can continue to be real parents to your child. Use your common sense and make arrangements that suit everybody. You need to be able to adapt and modify arrangements both in terms of what you want and expect and what is appropriate for your child according to their age, stage of development and whatever is happening in your family at the time.

Children also grow increasingly independent the older they get. If your child does not want to come to your house on 'your' days then you have the responsibility to give or withhold permission, not the other parent. If your child doesn't want to go to the other parent then don't get in the middle. Encourage your child (if old enough) to negotiate directly with the other parent. It is his or her time of responsibility for the child. Children, even teenagers, must learn how to check their plans with the appropriate parent as automatically as they put on a pair of shoes. This strengthens their relationship and teaches them the benefits of going directly to the source and, if necessary, how to compromise. However, parents and children need to know what is negotiable and what is not.

### **A word about Grandparents**

Generally speaking parents love their children and usually in turn their children's children. Grandparents can be very important to children particularly in providing a constant presence. Some grandparents have the interest and desire to provide their grandchildren with love, stability, time and affection. The relationship between children and grandparents is always significant and can help to foster in children a deep sense of family belonging. It is important where the relationship between parents ceases, that contact with both sets of grandparents and the extended family continues if possible. It is important not only for the grandparents but especially for the grandchildren concerned.

It can happen (especially where couples are not married to each other) that should the relationship end between two parents, one parent is excluded from the children. This exclusion can then extend to the grandparents. Grandparents can suddenly find that they no longer have contact with the grandchildren they have come to love. This can prove devastating for the whole family and the children can find themselves isolated from one whole side of the family. This is unfair on the children and on the whole family. Try to avoid this happening if at all possible. Try to talk through the situation, share information, try mediation but most of all focus on what is in the best interest of your child. If all these fail families may have to avail of the legal remedies which are now available. See page 83 on legal provision for persons related to children other than parents.



Sometimes grandparents can too easily interfere in the lives of their children, especially where their children and grandchildren are living with them, and offer negative comments concerning the other parent. This can make the situation difficult for the child's other parent and can have a negative impact on the child's self esteem.

It is vital in this scenario that the parents of the child remain in control and keep the best interests of the child centre stage. It may be necessary for parents to challenge the attitudes and behaviour of their own parents in order to achieve a certain amount of equilibrium in a situation where a child and both her parents can be treated with respect and politeness by all.

### **Shared parenting and new families**

The formation of new families is looked at in detail in the next chapter so a quick word here will suffice.

You will need to re-examine issues around personal territory, discipline, chores and personal attention when a new family is established. Your relationship with the other parent of your child is a critical one and when one of you acquires a new partner whatever arrangements you have in sharing the parenting of your child will probably need to be re-negotiated with the establishment of a new relationship. New arrangements about custody, finances and what to call the new adult need to be agreed. New relationships are not a step back to old family history, but a step forward to a newer version with its own unique values, customs, and ways.

Reassure the other parent of your child that you want the shared parenting to continue, and allow the new adult and child develop their own relationship at their own pace without interference. It is important to see the new step-parent as an additional parent, not as a replacement or a competitor.

The new family can thrive with a good working relationship or can be sabotaged by spiteful former mates and misguided children.

The Family Support Agency's Family Mediation Service gives us this list of dos and don'ts for shared parenting

## DO

- Be positive
- Support the other parent
- Be flexible
- Be co-operative
- Have the children ready on time
- Consider the children's needs and wishes
- Allow for different house rules

## DON'T

- Argue in front of the children
- Disappoint the children
- Be late
- Quiz the children
- Criticise the other parent
- Give the children too much power
- Allow the children to play you off against each other

Your child is entitled to the best relationship possible with each of you.

## Long distance parenting

Where two parents live at some distance from each other, some additional decisions may need to be made. The publication *Mom's House Dad's House* is directed at an American audience who have much more experience of long distance parenting and therefore have useful additional questions which need to be asked and answered.

- Where does the child live during school/holidays?
- Who will pay for travel?
- How long is too long for parent and child to be separated?
- How will communications be handled between parents and between each parent and child?

Children need to know when they will see their parent next and how they are going to remain in touch. They also need explanations as to why both parents need to live far apart. Be aware that the hello/goodbye situation is difficult for children and they may react strongly to both leaving and arriving. For younger children, it may seem a long time before they see a parent again. You could get a big calendar and mark off the days where your child is travelling to see the other parent and other important contact days for them.

#### **Other pointers include:**

- Stay in touch regularly by phone, text, tapes, letters, e-mail etc.
- Make a date to watch the same TV programme and compare notes.
- Provide your child with stamped addressed envelopes to write to you.
- Collect things that remind you of your child and that you want to show your child when she arrives.
- Let your child know that you are thinking about her when she is not with you.

#### **Re-involving the absent parent**

In some situations a parent who has dropped out of her/his child's life can re-surface after some time. Or where the parents were unmarried a parent who has never been involved may wish to begin a relationship with a child. This can be very difficult for the parent who has survived parenting alone. There may be many unresolved feelings resulting from the relationship break-up in addition to harboured anger over years of neglect of the child.

***Research indicates that children appreciate any contact, no matter how little, with both parents. Therefore it would be good if you could focus on your child's needs rather than on your own feelings.***

As an initial step would you consider allowing the other parent access to school/medical records? This does not give the other parent any right to make decisions about the child but does give her/him some information about the child. You have lost nothing but the other parent can gain a good deal of respect and status as a result.

***For the parent trying to re-establish contact:*** keep the relationship with the other parent at a business level and if the initial attempt fails this does not mean a permanent rejection. Follow up with a letter stating your intent and desire to become an active parent. Persistence and a show of good faith on your part are important. Encourage the other parent to discuss your involvement with the child and if she/he agrees to give it a try, you could start with contacting your child by letter or by phone, or both.

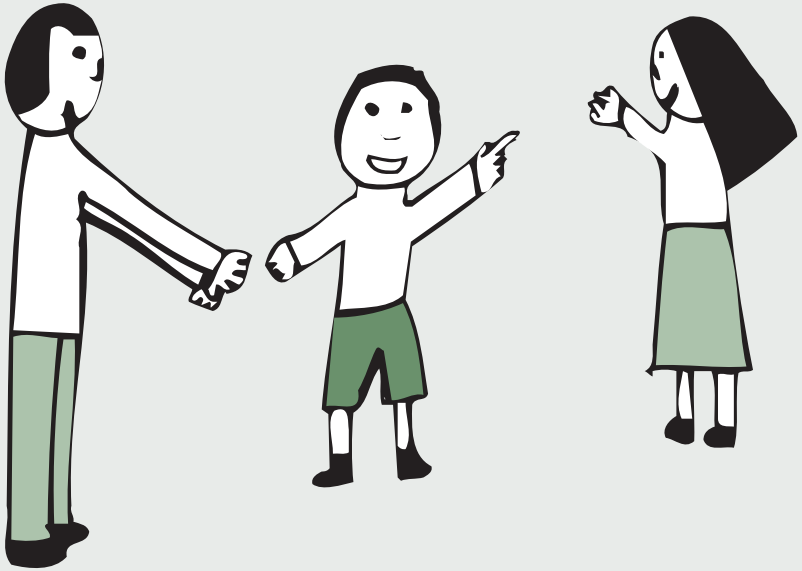
If you haven't seen your child in years establishing contact should be a gradual process. Visits can then be built up with perhaps a second home for the child being established over time. There may be some tension and distrust in the first few months but given the best interest of your child, faith and hard work, it could just work out!

### ***Most children want both parents involved in their lives.***

However, the scepticism of friends and family may show itself in distrust or hostility. ***"I'd just wait and see if he really means it this time." "I'd never forgive a woman like that."*** Only the two people involved in a relationship really know what is going on, but sometimes other people require a lot of your patience!

### **If all else fails**

With the best will in the world sometimes it is not possible to make shared parenting work on a voluntary basis. If communication, information and mediation all fail, you may have no option but to pursue the attainment of your rights through a court of law. See Chapter 6 for legal possibilities.



*New families*

**E**stablishing a step-family is a major life change and like any major transition it can bring stresses and conflicting emotions to the surface. This means that establishing a step-family is hard work but, equally, step-families can be rewarding places in which to grow up for children.

### **Initially**

You need to recognise that everyone may have strong but also mixed feelings about living in a step-family. The adults will have anxieties, but also hopes and expectations that everything will work out for the best. The young people may be looking forward to the arrival of a new adult, but they may also be resistant and unwilling to accept the changes that will inevitably follow. Children may not have the same feelings as the adults about the new family and parents need to accept this. However, if young people have a chance to get to know their new step-parent slowly over a period of time this will make things easier than if the parent's new relationship is presented to them without warning. This will give young people a chance to get used to the idea of a new adult in the family and a chance to work through some of the confusing, mixed feelings before the step-parent actually arrives in the family.

Children may at first feel that because the new parent comes into the family they will inevitably get less - less time, less love, less space, emotional and/or physical, and if there are other children, fewer material things. There is a need to understand how the children might be feeling in the new family and it could be useful to sit down and have a chat about things. As you get to know each other more you will feel better about letting each other have a place. It is the task of the family especially the task of the birth parent, to help everyone see that the problems that do arise are shared problems and that if everyone is willing to work together, the creation of the step-parent family can mean a more satisfying family for everyone.

However, new rules about privacy and respect for individual preferences need to be worked out to safeguard activities, interests and territory, with an appropriate sense of place and history. Clear, agreed rules and traditions should be gradually built up which will be different from the original family and can help the children to know what is expected and what will not be tolerated. It takes a long time for a step-family to develop and function successfully and this needs to be viewed as an ongoing process.

Be creative and inventive about finding solutions to your difficulties. Recognise and explore your own feelings and those of the other people involved. Allow yourself to recognise how and why your feelings and your child's feelings may differ as this may help you all be more tolerant of each other.

### *Expect less of yourself and forgive more.*

#### **Check your assumptions**

Families can have unspoken assumptions, for example that other families don't argue. Not all rules and assumptions are realistic and trying to apply unrealistic rules and assumptions to families can make for unhappiness. In addition children may find themselves in a position where they have to adapt as they move between households with entirely different sets of rules and assumptions.

In *All Together Now - what to expect when step-families get together*- Claire Salisbury and Cheryl Walters draw attention to some assumptions you may have:

- Everybody has to be happy all the time (you could collapse under this kind of pressure)
- We all have to be together all the time (we all need 'alone' time)
- We've all got to like each other (you don't have to - however respect would be useful)
- Adults have to love children equally (impossible - though treating children equally is important)
- Children have to love adults equally (impossible and unfair - though they can learn fairness and respect from you)
- Everyone else is having a wonderful time ('fraid not - everyone else is muddling through just like you)
- Adults never make mistakes (actually we all do - saying sorry is helpful when we do make mistakes)
- We must never change our minds (aren't we stuck!).

### **Good communication**

It is essential to keep the communication lines open if difficulties are to be overcome and realising that the responsibility for working things out is everyone's business, children's as well as parents. When all parties have a good understanding of their own and each other's role it can work well. Honest communication makes it possible for differences to be accommodated and new ways of doing things to be explored. It certainly helps if problems are discussed openly, arrangements are flexible and if everyone can at least be polite. Step-families must find their own ways of working things out and this takes time. It is worth bearing in mind that everyone may have to sacrifice some of their own comforts for the good of the total family.

### **Managing family conflict**

When problems arise that are proving difficult to address try to find out what others in your family are thinking and feeling. Find out what they want to happen and be clear about what you want too. But before talking to the others think about what you may be willing to give up before you ask others to do the same.

**Round the table meetings** are times when everybody gets together to talk about important family issues. Talking within the family is essential. These meetings can provide a forum in which each member has the opportunity to have her/his say, listen to others and learn to negotiate and compromise, which are all useful skills to develop. Find a time that suits everyone and hold the meeting in a neutral area where everyone is comfortable and has a space, for example around the kitchen table. Provide refreshments - the meeting might be hard work so provide treats! Make your ground rules, for example, no one walks out, shouts or hits anyone, allow time for everyone so speak one at a time. Make it possible for anyone to call a meeting if something is upsetting them.

Each person has needs, and each person will expect the other members of the family to take their needs into account. The extent to which this happens will affect the type of discussion which takes place in the family. It will also affect the freedom that people have to air their feelings. In the end it has to be acknowledged that:

- Everyone has a part to play
- Compromise is necessary
- Negative feelings can be expressed without the family falling apart or being badly damaged



Sometimes you may need to make it clear that not everyone may be happy with the decided outcome but that you want to come up with compromises together because you value what they have to say.

It is essential to recognise that the responsibility for working through the issues are a shared one. No one person, step-parent, child or birth parent can be expected to make adjustments and compromises on her/his own.

It may, of course, turn out that communication between family members is impossible, or that discussion seems to go around and get nowhere. If this does happen, don't be afraid to seek outside help.

Don't be shy or ashamed to talk to others. It helps to put things into perspective. Many people have said how invaluable friends, counsellors, other family members and professional organisations can be. To learn that there are others in the same situation, to share experiences, and to know that your family is not the only one with problems are the sort of things that make all the difference. Only by sharing with others can you discover that you are not alone. You also need to understand that if it is awful that it is not necessarily your fault, and that it isn't the end of the story.

***Enjoy the good times and get some support when you need it.***

#### **Family celebrations and special days**

The sense of loss and sadness which all step-families experience is always more painful at family times of celebration such as weddings, birthdays even funerals. Different members of step-families can have different assumptions and expectations about special get-togethers. While conventions do exist around rituals in Ireland you may need to find your own solutions to celebrating rituals in your new family situation.

***You will find it easier to cope if you do not look for perfection.***

Be sensitive to your child whose parents live in different households. Consider how you may accommodate her needs as well as your own. Don't make her choose between one parent and another, this can be damaging and is unfair on her. Sort arrangements out between yourselves and allow yourself to be content, if not happy, with what is agreed.

Prioritise with your family what is important, who needs to see whom (with time for yourself and your family included) and make a list of jobs that need to be done and who should do them.

It can be very tough on children if children and stepchildren are being given unequal presents. This can be highlighted at celebration times when everyone wants things to be perfect. Remember that the size and value of presents given and received can be a marker of competition between parents and step-parents and between children and step-children. People often behave unfairly without being aware of it, perhaps because they themselves have been subjected to unfair treatment. Remember, too, that presents do not make up for quality time and attention.

It can also be a mistake to blame all problems on being a step-family. Inasmuch as there is no such thing as a perfect family, there is no such thing as a perfect step-family. However difficulties can be magnified in a step-family. Try to think of solutions, not problems.

### **The birth parent in the step-family**

Remember that you as the birth parent have a difficult task - to care for, love, encourage and support yourself, your partner and your child whilst providing clear guidelines for behaviour, managing a household on a limited income and balancing your needs as a couple with the needs of your child and the extended family! You can find yourself slap in the middle of the strains, torn between your child and your new partner: *“Everyone wanted me, wanted a claim on me, and whenever a row broke out I felt like the meat in the sandwich. I found myself talking it through with him, then going to them, and then wondering how to resolve the two viewpoints. Nobody thought I was fair, and each thought I was taking the other’s side”*. Be clear about who is in charge and who will make decisions and respect people’s differences. Try not to rush your child into giving your partner affection.

You are the bridge between the step-parent and your child. They start out with no common ground, no shared experience, and sometimes some antagonism.

To your child, your new partner is a stranger and so she will need time to get to know and trust her/him. Where conflict does arise check your own expectations. Some parents may, without thinking too much about it, expect their new partner to accept just a minor role. Alternatively they may assume that the child, being younger, will be flexible enough to welcome a new adult and fit in with new arrangements. Expectations like this will have to be modified if the family is to work well together. In step-families it is frequently you as the birth parent, who holds the key.

## Remember:

- Try not to take sides. Your child is learning how to share you with another. Sometimes she may feel that she is not being treated fairly.
- Try to be patient. Your child will need time to adjust to new homes and circumstances, to the ways that things are now done and to sharing her parent's time.
- Try not to make your child feel pressured into taking sides. She may still have feelings and loyalties for her other parent. It will be easier for her to adjust if you co-operate over arrangements and resist prying questions about her other parent. Otherwise she may feel used and stuck in the middle.
- Talk about the need for privacy for all family members. Your child is adjusting to a new home environment and sharing it with a new person. Everyone needs to have personal space and privacy is important.
- It's not all bad! Although family change may be difficult, your child may recognise improvements in her family situation. Seeing you happy in a new relationship may make her feel that, although difficult, sometimes family change can be for the best.

It is important that you look after yourself as it is only possible for people to attend to others when they have been adequately looked after themselves.

### **The new step-parent**

It is useful to remember that the new step-parent may have become an 'instant' parent without the usual preparation for parenthood or gradual learning over time, and that making the transition from dating to living-in is enormous. While the new partnership is based on the emotional involvement of the two adults, the children are not 'chosen' by the step-parent in the same way. The creation of a step-family artificially accelerates the family life-cycle by 'telescoping' the stages of partnership formation and the arrival of children, demanding a number of challenging adjustments. In this context, the notion of 'instant love' which many step-parents feel should materialise between themselves and their step-children is clearly unrealistic, yet a frequently acknowledged source of anxiety and disappointment.

A new step-mother stated: *"I had coped very well as a mother, everything seemed to flow naturally. I loved my children and did what I thought was right. My behaviour was instinctive and I didn't question whether I was right or wrong - it all felt comfortable. But as a new and tentative step-mother I was completely at sea. I didn't love the children and they certainly didn't love me. All I know is that motherhood seemed fine but step-motherhood awful, and I began to convince myself that there was something really wrong with me that I couldn't love or hug these other children and act naturally."*

**Don't expect too much.** We presume that there is love in all families and this presumption applies equally to step-families. After all, the desire to live with the person we love is commonly the motivating force in the creation of any step-family. It can, of course, lead to all sorts of misunderstandings and unhappiness, especially where step-parents find that they do not - and cannot - love their step-children. By setting up home with a new man, a woman with a child is offering not only herself but also her child, and to have herself accepted but not her child may be an impossible rejection for her to live with.

If everyone can accept that there is a range of other positive feelings, like friendship, that can develop between a step-parent and step-children, then everyone has more chance of relaxing. After all, what's wrong with just liking someone else's children?

However, positive feelings between step-parent and step-child do take time to develop and the children's birth parent must play a key role in displaying patience and flexibility.

The most successful step-parents seem to be the ones who start with no expectations at all and certainly not an expectation of love. These step-parents are careful to make no demands, allowing the boy or girl to come to them in their own good time. *"You have to earn the love of step-children, with the result that you work at it every hour of the day. With your own child you know the love's there".*

*Children want friendship, they want support and they want understanding from their step-parents.*

**You are not a substitute for the other birth parent.** A step-parent who tries to become a substitute parent can provoke fears that the child is being encouraged to change her loyalties. Unless the child is very young and has no contact with her other parent it rarely happens that a step-parent takes a parent's place in the child's mind and heart. In most cases children are fiercely loyal to the birth parents and do not want anyone interfering with or trying to take over that relationship.

If step-parents are able to show that they recognise the importance of both birth parents, then things may be easier for the young people.

**Discipline.** A step-parent might best be described as a good friend - someone who can give advice, who can provide support in times of difficulty, who can be a shoulder to cry on, and who can be a companion with whom to pursue hobbies or leisure activities.

A friend however does not have control over the children in the way that a parent does. It is probably this issue of control that causes the biggest headaches for step-parents and it is probably here that the biggest clashes are likely to come. From the children's point of view step-parents do not have the same rights as birth parents. From the step-parents' point of view, however, there may be times when control has to be exercised, especially if the birth parent is absent or away at that particular moment.

Develop a relationship with your partner's child before attempting discipline so that there is some trust and respect between you. You may also find that you and your partner have different ideas about discipline, but try to agree basic rules and involve all the family.

The right to exercise control can be conferred on a step-parent, but this needs to be discussed and agreed openly by the birth parent, and acknowledged by the children. Unless this is done disagreement and resentment are inevitable.

One step-father says: *"It was clear that Margaret wasn't able to accept me as her step-father and I took the easy way out - of avoiding any confrontation. I think we now understand each other much better. I certainly realise that it would have been wrong for me to discipline the children before I really cared for them. And now when I really do care for them they are grown up and the idea of discipline is irrelevant."*

Step-parents have needs in the same way as all members of a family have needs. If these needs are not met the step-family will almost certainly be an unhappy one. Apart from the obvious needs of feeling loved and cared for, the step-parent has a need to feel included. Because of the already existing close relationships between the child and the birth parent, a sense of exclusion is something almost all step-parents experience, like, for instance, when talking about how things used to be. The step-parent must accept that the family had a history before s/he arrived on the scene. And children like to hear adults reminisce about their own childhoods too and the step-parent will have new stories to add to the family folk-lore. Over time the new family will develop its own history.

Remember there is no such thing as a perfect (step-) parent! No one is born knowing how to be a parent or step-parent, you learn from your own parents and 'on the job' and this is fine. It is helpful for step-parents to be able to acknowledge this and feel free at times to say that they haven't the foggiest idea how to deal with a situation. To be able to do this will give the positive message to children that it is OK not to have all the answers.

So don't try to be a perfect step-parent - there is no such thing. And don't try to be what you are not.

Give it time. New relationships cannot be formed overnight as much has to be worked through. Many negative feelings have to be abandoned and much effort has to go into building up trust. Many day-to-day experiences have to accumulate until there is a strong enough bond which survives the ordinary ups and downs of life. But it can happen, never lose sight of that.

The novelist Jilly Cooper says of her relationship with her step-daughter: *"Its an adventure... she's 33 and I'm 53 and we're great friends. It is a wonderful warm relationship now but it has taken time. I feel immensely benefited that we have got it together at last. Its a challenge - like climbing Everest and you fall down a bit and you have another go and perhaps you are only at the foothills and perhaps one day you might get to the top".*

### **The new couple**

For the new couple there is never a time when they are not aware of the children. Indeed the children came before their own courtship. This means that finding time to be alone together can be difficult and often has to be foregone in order to take a child to a class or look for a lost toy. Nevertheless you do need to be able to separate from your child without feeling guilty

about doing so. New partnerships need protected time to feel secure and to flourish.

The key to step-family stability is the quality of the relationship between the adult couple and time on your own as a couple is crucial to a healthy and fulfilling relationship. You may need to put in place boundaries that were not necessary before if you have to, for example, closing the bedroom door at night. Your child may feel excluded and the truth is that she is. This can be difficult for her and for you, however it is important for the couple to be able to have exclusive time to themselves. Making time for yourselves strengthens you as a couple and you will be better able to meet your child's needs when they are not impinging upon or infringing your own needs. There will always be some tension between meeting your needs as individuals and as a couple and those of your child. The important thing is to find a balance.

Remember not to blame each other when things go badly. Try to understand your partner's point of view. Someone might be feeling left out, mixed up, or unimportant.

### **The other birth parent**

Both birth parents will always have a special place in a child's life. You may need to reassure your child that you understand this and that both birth parents will keep their relationship with the child alive and special. It is important that it is recognised by all concerned that both parents plan to continue to be involved with the child. See Chapter 3 on how to continue to share the parenting of your child.

However, it can be too easy for one parent to become resentful of a new partner, jealous of the new relationship and afraid the child will become attached to a new partner. So it is easy for one parent to side with the child when she criticises her step-parent, even encourage her to be awkward with her other parent or step-parent. It is very important therefore, before this situation gets out of hand, that unreasonable behaviour is challenged and dealt with firmly. Do not allow it to get to the stage where tempers are frayed and emotions are explosive.

It can also be easy to become resentful about the living arrangements of children where they are living with another adult who is not their parent. But these feelings can become less as time goes on, especially if the children can spend time with both parents and the parents can treat each other with respect.

Unfortunately, many parents who do not see their children often give up trying to maintain contact with them once a step-family comes into existence. Such parents do not stop being parents but they stop doing it, perhaps in the mistaken belief that they are unnecessary to the children. Providing maintenance is one way of showing love and care for a child, but not the only one. It is continuing and reliable attention which matters most to a child. There can be great difficulties in sharing children and in accepting that former partners have a new life with someone else. But it is the children who lose when a parent cuts off although everyone can gain when they do not. When the adults understand that children need them all, and find ways to have satisfying contact, tensions are likely to disappear. When children know that both birth parents will continue to care about them and look after them, their anger and suspicions begin to fade. Do persevere for the sake of the children and try to sort out any difficulties.

*It is not adding people to children's lives, but rather taking important people away, that is hard for them to accept.*

### **The children**

It is important to acknowledge that children are an essential ingredient in any change and that the success or failure of a new relationship will be heavily influenced by the reactions and behaviour of the children. When a step-family begins, the adults have a new life together which they are happy about. The children may not feel the same way. Unless they are very young, the chances are that they will feel angry, sad and possibly frightened:

**angry** that a new person seems to have come into the place a father or mother was in,

**sad** because the mother or father they are with is preoccupied with a new partner and because they feel the loss of the birth parent not living with them, and

**frightened** because they do not know what to expect or how they will fit into the new family.

Becoming a member of a step-family is a huge adjustment but when changes are explained, children cope better.



**Children need information** and want to be consulted and involved in decisions that will affect their lives. If a new partner is entering your life your child will want reassurance that she is still important to both her birth parents. She will also want to know whether and how this new set-up will affect her relationship with her other birth parent.

Listen to your child and give her plenty of opportunities to express her feelings and listen to what she has to say. As stated in Chapter 1, one of the basic needs of all children is to feel that they are being listened to and they need the time and space to express their opinions on what is happening. So listen well and talk things over with her.

While children should be encouraged to have their say, they should know that they do not have the final say. In valuing your child by listening to her feelings (but not requiring her to make a decision) you will help her to cope with adult decisions more effectively. However, children often do not like decisions adults have made that affect them. It is therefore important that adults listen to children and consider their point of view. Listening to your child does not mean that you have to change your mind (although you may decide to).

**Children and you.** Reassure your child that a new partner for you does not lessen your love and commitment to her. If your child is old enough to understand about adult male/female relationships explain your need for this sort of companionship but stress that it makes no difference to your relationship with your child. All children like some time with their parents which is special to them, and it makes sense for step-parents to help this happen, even though this might be difficult for them. In time the children may come to realise that having another adult in the family could have benefits for them too!

**Children and step-parents.** Where a family has spent some time as a one parent family it may be difficult for children to accept a new person and the changes which that person may bring to the family. Children who have become used to their mother taking all the responsibility may resent it when decisions may have to await the agreement of their step-father.

Difficult issues need to be sorted out - like what authority has a step-parent over the children - without appearing to usurp the place of either birth parent. Step-parents and step-children need time to become familiar with and used to one another and up until that time step-parents are in no position to discipline the children. Children who are old enough to remember a parent need their step-parent to care for them in such a way as not to challenge their feelings and loyalties.

Children may feel guilty about liking the new people in your family. It doesn't mean that they are turning their back on their other parent. Reassure them that the step-parent doesn't have to take the place of their mum or dad. They can have a very good but different sort of relationship. *"I think my step-dad is all right, but I don't show it because I don't want to upset my Dad."*

Talk to her about what she would like to call your new partner.

**Children and their other birth parent:** Where you already have a parenting plan in place you may need to re-examine it with your child's other parent in the light of your new living arrangements. When children see their other parent it is important they move at their pace in spending time with them. Children also need everyone to accept the fact that they are in touch with their other parent and to allow them to talk about and share their experiences. See Chapter 3 on shared parenting.

**Children as little horrors.** Children in all families can be very shrewd at playing both ends against the middle and by singling out a parent's weakness and playing on this. One new parent found herself in long debates on dishwashing, homework and bedtimes which she mostly lost because the children's arguments usually were prefaced by *"Dad said...."* or *"We always used to ..."* This parent eventually told the children *"This is the way I want it done"*.

No matter how much children may dislike any individual decision or rule, it is usually reassuring for children to know that they can rely upon stability and order being provided in the step-family. This is much easier said than done and there may be many battles and tears.

### **And then there were....**

Sometimes two lone parents, each with their own children, come together and form a new family. This can often be presented in fiction as a recipe for hilarious disaster, with super-parents triumphing over countless hurdles. Life does have its hilarity, disasters and hurdles but very few of us are super-parents!

It is especially important in this situation, where you have the added ingredient of two sets of young people, to define the ground rules, to be very careful that the communication lines are kept wide open, constantly checking statements and assumptions and being clear with the children about who is in charge. Do ensure that no one is walked on - especially you! There will be times when you will have to make arbitrary decisions regarding the children but generally try to involve them in resolving crises, consulting them on their views and constantly reassuring them that you love them.

*"I felt that me mum was being nicer to them than she was to me. They never got shouted at if they did anything wrong. Me and me sister used to get the blame and they didn't get shouted at. Me mum felt she couldn't tell them off 'cos they weren't hers. But as time's gone on, if we do something wrong it's all our faults and we all get it."*

Your own child will make extraordinary demands. She will expect you to take her part and will test you and your love until she is confident that she does not have to continually compete for it. There will be much wheeling and dealing and you will need a lot of trust, fairness, faith, common sense and an enormous sense of humour to make this work and the fact is that many people do.

### **Other people**

Sometimes other family members can be angry and sad about the new step-family. Grandparents may be critical of the new family and afraid of losing contact with their grandchildren. How other people react to you becoming a step-family may well have a profound effect on your family's happiness and the children involved. Take positive steps to include anyone who is related to your child. Make sure everyone understands that they are welcome to take part in your child's life – providing that they do not become disruptive, difficult or too demanding.

### **A word about jealousy**

Many step-parents express surprise at how strongly they felt excluded by their partners' relationships with their children and step-parents can themselves feel jealous of the close relationship between parent and child.

*"I didn't expect her to be so excluding of me...I expected, in my own rosy sort of way, it to be her and me and the children. But it wasn't. It was her and the children and sometimes me being allowed just a little foot in, but not much. And I was very surprised at that. I was also surprised at how much it took out of me - the dreadful feelings of jealousy. I hadn't realised how intensely I would feel about the time they took and the energy they took and the way they sapped me and I became so jealous. I really was very surprised at that."*

Children might become angry or jealous when they see a parent and new partner enjoying each other's company. You need to let them know that you are getting a lot of comfort from the new relationship and from being loved by a new partner who makes you feel happy.

Jealousy can also be experienced by young people in relation to new step-siblings who bring with them more money, better clothes, different possessions and may mean altered family circumstances, for example, having to change or share bedrooms.

Jealousy is not something that can be swept under the carpet. In new relationships, new parents, new families, such feelings are bound to arise. There are no easy answers to this issue. The most helpful thing one can do is to be aware of this and to allow as many opportunities as possible for these feelings to be shared.

Be prepared to seek outside help. Many step-families have found the support of counsellors, or simply the opportunity of meeting and talking with other families to be of enormous benefit. There are problems we cannot always deal with ourselves - to seek the help of others can be the most sensible thing to do.

## Sexuality in step-parent families

There are special issues surrounding sexuality in step-families and because of the strong emotions and fragility of relationships sexuality sometimes becomes overtly important.

All children, and especially teenagers, have some difficulty accepting or coming to terms with their parents' sexuality. Most young people prefer not to think about their parents having sex, finding the thought 'disgusting'. In the step-family situation the children are brought face to face with the parent as a sexually active individual. Young people may find this very hard to cope with. Such things can be difficult to discuss openly, but if your teenager seems to be behaving oddly - ask yourself whether sex has anything to do with it. Some young people may avoid outings or activities when the two adults are likely to be together, and others may leave the room abruptly if there is any physical contact between the couple. These reactions may appear extreme, but for some children the sexual relationship between parent and step-parent seems at times literally unbearable. If jealousy already exists in the step-family then evidence of sexuality just makes things worse by emphasising the closeness and intimacy of the adults' relationship with each other. A sense of rivalry may develop between the teenager and his or her parent, increasing the likelihood of sexuality being used as a weapon in the family struggle for love and attention.

### What can adults do?

- Don't be sexually provocative. Don't walk around the house with nothing on. Don't dress or undress where you know you can be seen. Do keep the bathroom and bedroom door closed. And make it clear to teenagers that you expect the same from them. ***"You have to be terribly, terribly careful. I certainly dress very carefully when Robert comes to stay. I might lounge around the house in my night dress in the mornings if he weren't there but I don't when he's there."***
- Do maintain your own privacy. It is not necessary to kiss or cuddle in front of young people. If you are having a passionate sexual relationship do be discreet, and remember the sensibilities of other members of the family.
- Do not intrude on the privacy of the teenager. Privacy is extremely important to young people, so do not barge into their bedroom without knocking. Do not enter the bathroom if you know they're there.

The possibility that the step-parent and step-child will feel sexually attracted to each other cannot be ignored, and such situations need to be very carefully managed. If such a situation arises these feelings should not be expressed, should not be allowed to develop and certainly should not be acted upon. If at all possible the matter should be discussed or shared with the young person's birth parent. If the feelings continue it would be wise to seek professional help. It may be necessary for the two people involved to spend as little time as possible with each other. In this area adults have a responsibility towards young people in their care, and a sexual relationship between a step-parent and a teenager is wrong in every respect.

### **A word about adoption**

If your step-family is made up of a mother who had her child before she married and she is now married to a man who is not the father of her child then it is possible for the couple to apply to adopt the mother's child. This is called Family Adoption. This is the only way of establishing a legal link between a step-parent and a child in Ireland. An adoption usually indicates a desire for permanency of the family unit.

As both parents as a couple must adopt the child the mother will legally become the child's adoptive mother. Adoption confers full parental rights and obligations on the adoptive father and this is especially important in the event of the death of the mother. It also creates a legal family unit with constitutional protection.

For children, the fact that the adoption has taken place indicates to them the commitment of the adoptive father and his willingness to take on responsibility for them. Children can gain security within the new family unit.

The child will acquire the same surname as the family and will have the same inheritance rights as any child born into the marriage.

Even where the link with the birth parent has been insignificant or non-existent the issue of adoption should be considered seriously. Adoption has the effect of severing all legal links between the child, the birth father and his family, including the father's right to apply for access to, custody or guardianship of the child. It also means that the child's right to maintenance and inheritance from the father is also lost. Adoption changes the identity of the child (and indeed the mother in relation to the child) and obscures her birth details. The child loses one identity and takes on another.

***It is important to consider the implications of establishing one legal relationship at the expense of another.***

Under the 1998 Adoption Act birth fathers are now being consulted, if possible, about the adoption of their children. Consultation is required whether or not the father is a joint guardian of his child. If there are compelling reasons for not contacting the natural father, the Adoption Board may accept a sworn affidavit from the mother to that effect.

Where the child's birth father is a guardian (either through a Statutory Declaration or a Court Order) his consent to the adoption is required.

If you wish to proceed with a family adoption contact the Adoption Board directly who will take you through the process. There is no charge for this service. See ***Useful Organisations*** at the back of this booklet.

### **In conclusion**

Step-families can provide a satisfactory framework for the fullest development of family life for adults and children.

When successful, step-family members of all ages gain the benefit of being connected to a wide range of related people. Step-families are a positive investment in family life and are created because we all want successful relationships.

It really does take years for a step-family to become cohesive and in the meantime there will be times when it seems as if you will never find a way to get together satisfactorily. However, there are many successful step-families who have been through extremely difficult situations, and have found that they now have good relationships with each other, apparently against all odds.

With step-families, as with all other families, the secret of success is most often through self-awareness and self-help. Like all families a step-family can succeed only if sufficient effort and imagination are put into it and if all its members are prepared to exercise those same personal qualities of courage, unselfishness and tolerance that are required in all families.

***Step-families are like all other families – their success depends on how much their members are prepared to put into them.***





*Resolving disputes  
without going to court*

## Family Mediation

**T**he Family Support Agency's Family Mediation Service is a free, professional and confidential service for couples who have decided to separate and who together want to negotiate the terms of their separation with the help of a trained mediator. The Family Mediation Service is available for individuals who have never lived together but may have a child to parent and who wish to come to mediation to negotiate parenting and contact arrangements. Family mediation assists separating parents to look at the resources and options open to them and to reach an agreement that meets the needs and interests of both and the needs and interests of their children.

### The Process of Mediation

When the parents arrive at a Family Mediation Centre they are seen together by their mediator. The mediator explains that in this process:

- the parents are the decision makers
- the mediator's role is to facilitate their discussions and to manage their negotiations
- the mediator is neither a counsellor nor a legal adviser

At this initial session the mediator hears why the parents have opted for mediation, what their expectations are from mediation and what issues they need to discuss in order to reach agreement. The parents then create their own agenda of issues for negotiation.

The usual issues for two parents who have a child or children together are:

- Parenting – how will the children spend time with each of their parents and how will the parents communicate about their children?
- Financial support – what support will be paid for the children?
- What contact will the child/children have with their Grandparents

When the parties have reached agreement on the above issues, the mediator draws up a Note of Mediated Agreement. The parents can then take the Note of Mediated Agreement to their respective solicitors to be drawn up into a legal contract or have it made a Rule of Court. Family mediation can take anything from two to six sessions to complete depending on the level of communication between the parties and the complexity of the issues involved. At the end of the process, if appropriate,

the parents are invited to bring their children along to explain the future arrangements agreed so that children are reassured that both parents continue to have their best interests at heart.

The Family Support Agency's Family Mediation Service has a total of sixteen centres nationally, comprising four full-time centres in Cork, Dublin, Galway and Limerick and twelve part-time family mediation centres in Athlone, Blanchardstown, Castlebar, Dundalk, Letterkenny, Portlaoise, Raheny, Sligo, Tallaght, Tralee, Waterford and Wexford. The Agency is running a family mediation pilot project in Ballymun Law centre. See page 89 for a list of addresses.

Private mediators are also available and can be contacted through the Mediators Institute of Ireland. See Useful Organisations at the back of this booklet.

### **Collaborative Family Law.**

Collaborative family law is a new and informal method to help resolve family law disputes in a dignified manner. The aim is to find a fair and equitable agreement for the parents based on reasoned judgment and realistic aspirations. The success and effectiveness of the system depends on the honesty, cooperation and integrity of the parents. It is geared towards the future and ongoing wellbeing of the family as a whole. The ultimate aim is to avoid conflict in family law disputes.

In this collaborative process the solicitors and their clients agree in writing to reach settlement without getting the court involved. They agree to work together to resolve parenting and financial issues. Utilising their skills in client representation, negotiation and problem-solving, collaborative family lawyers help their clients shape a fair agreement.

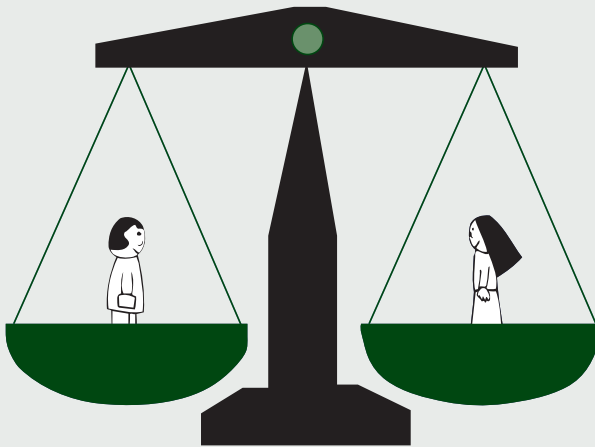
Relationship breakdown will always involve financial and emotional costs. The benefits of collaborative family law help minimise those costs for all concerned.

### How does it work?

- The parents in dispute agree with their trained collaborative lawyers to resolve issues without going to court or threatening to go to court
- Negotiations are conducted through a '4 way' face to face meeting (i.e. parents and solicitors) where each parent may be heard
- All information and disclosure is provided in the collaborative process with a commitment to honesty and openness
- The parents remain in control of the process and make the decisions but with the solicitors there throughout for legal advice and guidance

If no settlement can be reached new solicitors will have to be instructed for court proceedings.

To find a solicitor providing this service contact the Association of Collaborative Practitioners at [www.acp.ie](http://www.acp.ie). The Legal Aid Board also offers this service.



*A quick guide to legal remedies  
concerning parenting*

Sometimes, even with the best will in the world, it is not possible for two parents to reach agreement on how to parent their children jointly and it may be necessary to institute court proceedings in order for the court to adjudicate on the dispute between the parents.

This is a very brief description of the legal possibilities for sorting out parenting issues. For more details get a copy of the relevant leaflets from the National Information Centre for parents who are not married to each other listed on page 91 or at [treoir.ie/publications.html](http://treoir.ie/publications.html).

Treoir has also published a very useful guide for parents who are seeking ways of resolving disputes regarding children entitled *Taking the Stand* which is available from Treoir, the National Information Centre for parents who are not married to each other for €5. It contains valuable information on trying to resolve disputes without going to court but also offers tips on how to represent yourself in court should you become involved in court hearings.

## 1. Where parents are not married to each other:

### Paternity:

- A presumption of paternity arises from the father's name being entered in the Register of Births
- Paternity can be established through the local District Court during proceedings for maintenance, access, custody or guardianship.
- A Declaration of Paternity can be sought in the Circuit Court.

### Guardianship:

A guardian of a child has rights and responsibilities in making decisions on all the major matters affecting the up-bringing of the child, for example, choice of school, religion, medical treatment, passport applications, adoption.

- The mother of a child born outside marriage is automatically the guardian of the child.
- The father of a child born outside marriage is not automatically a guardian of his child but can become a guardian as follows:

- ▶ Guardianship rights can be agreed between the two unmarried parents by signing Statutory Declaration SI No. 5 of 1998 in the presence of a Peace Commissioner, Commissioner for Oaths or Notary Public.
- ▶ Where the parents do not agree then a father can apply to the local District Court for joint guardianship rights in respect of his child.

***A father does not become a guardian simply by having his name in the Register of Births.***

### **Access**

- ▶ If a child is being denied access to a parent then that parent can apply for access to the local District Court. If the Court decides that it is in the best interest of the child that such access be established then the Court may set the time, place and duration of the access.
- ▶ Anyone related to a child by blood or adoption or who has acted in loco parentis may apply to the court for leave to apply for access to a child.

### **Custody**

Custody is the day-to-day care of a child.

- ▶ The mother of a child born outside marriage has sole custody of her child.
- ▶ The father may apply to the court for sole or joint custody of his child.

### **Maintenance**

Both parents are responsible for maintaining their child, but not each other.

- ▶ Either parent can take the other parent to court where adequate maintenance is not being paid in respect of the child.

If a parent does not pay maintenance in accordance with a court order and s/he is in employment, an Attachment of Earnings can be sought and the maintenance can be deducted from the wages at source.

## 2. Where parents are married to each other and have separated or divorced:

### **Paternity**

There is a legal assumption that any child born to a married woman is the child of her husband.

### **Guardianship**

- ▶ Both married parents are automatically guardians of their children. Married couples do not give up their guardianship rights of their children if they legally separate or divorce.

### **Access**

- ▶ If a child is being denied access to a parent then that parent can apply for the access to be established by applying to the local District Court. If the Court decides that it is in the best interest of the child that such access be established then the Court may set the time, place and duration of the access.
- ▶ Anyone related to a child by blood or adoption or who as acted in loco parentis may apply to the court for leave to apply for access to a child.

### **Custody**

Custody is the day-to-day care of a child.

- ▶ Both married parents have automatic joint custody of their child.

The custody of the child is one of the factors to be determined during separation/divorce proceedings. If the parents cannot agree then the court will impose a decision.

### **Maintenance**

- ▶ Both married parents are responsible for maintaining each other and their child.

The maintenance of the spouses and child is one of the factors to be determined during separation/divorce proceedings. If the parents cannot agree then the court will impose a decision.



# Bibliography

*All Together Now - what to expect when stepfamilies get together*, Claire Salisbury and Cheryl Walters, STEPFAMILY Publications, London, 1977.

*Children's Experiences of Parental Separation*, Diane Hogan, Ann Marie Halpenny and Sheila Greene, Children's Research Centre, TCD, Dublin, 2002.

*Diary of a Stepfather*, Leslie Wilson, STEPFAMILY Publications, London, 1996.

*Divorce and Children – a series of leaflets*, The Children's Society, London 1998.

*Do I have a Daddy – A story about a single-parent child*, Jeanne Warren Lindsay, Morning Glory Press, California 1991.

*For the Sake of the Children – the Families Need Fathers guide to Shared Parenting*, FNF publications, London, 2001.

*Help for Separating Couples*, Family Mediation Service - series of 7 leaflets, Dublin, (nd).

*It's No Big Deal Really - A parents guide to making divorce easy for children*, Anne Cantelo, London 2007.

*Learning to Step Together – building and strengthening stepfamilies*, a handbook for step-parents and parents. Adapted and revised by Tim Kahn. STEPFAMILY publications, London, (nd).

*Mom's House, Dad's House – making shared custody work, how parents can make two homes for their children after divorce*. Isolina Ricci, Collier Books, Collier Macmillan Publishers, London, 1980.

*My Family's Changing, Family Fragments* – support for families under stress, *Divorce, Separation, New Families* – how to help your child through family change, Parentline Plus, London, 1999.

*Parenting Threads – caring for children when couples part* - Editors: Erica De'ath and Dee Slater. STEPFAMILY Publications, London, 1992.

*Parents are Forever*, NMGC, Rugby, England (nd).

*Shared Parenting – help with parenting after divorce or separation*, a leaflet, One Parent Families, Scotland. (nd).

*Stepfamilies talking*, Elizabeth Hodder, McDonald Optima, London, 1989.

*Step-parenting in the 1990s*. Elsa Ferri and Kate Smith, Family & Parenthood Policy & Practice, London, 1998.

*Teenagers and Step-Parents*, Dr. John Coleman, Tapewise (Audio Publications) Ltd. for the Trust for the Study of Adolescence, Brighton, 1990.

*The non-custodial father: common challenges in parenting after divorce*, Mary Lund in *Reassessing Fatherhood - new observations on fathers and the modern family* edited by Charlie Lewis and Margaret O'Brien, SAGE Publications Ltd., London, 1987.

*Understanding Families – Children's perspectives*, Virginia Morrow, National Children's Bureau, London, 1998.

*United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, United Nations, Geneva, 1989.

*When Parents Separate – helping your children to cope*, John Sharry, Peter Reid, Eugene Donohue, Veritas Publications, Dublin, 2001.

*When Parents Split Up*, Teenage information Series, Ann Mitchell, W&R Chambers Ltd., Edinburgh, 1986

*Where's Daddy?* J.Curtis, V. Ellis, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., London, 1996

# Useful Organisations

## **Accord Catholic Marriage Care Service**

Central Office, Columbia Centre,  
St. Patrick's College,  
Maynooth,  
Co. Kildare.

**Tel:** (01) 505 3112

**E-mail:** admin@accord.ie  
www.accord.ie

## **Adoption Board**

Shelbourne House,  
Shelbourne Road,  
Ballsbridge,  
Dublin 4.

**Tel:** (01) 230 9300

www.adoptionboard.ie

## **AIM Family Services**

Family Law Information, Counselling  
and Mediation Centre,  
6 D'Olier Street,  
Dublin 2.

**Tel:** (01) 670 8363 (mornings only)

**E-mail:** aimfamilyservices@eircom.net  
www.aimfamilyservices.ie

## **Barnardos Library**

Christchurch Square,  
Dublin 8.

**Tel:** (01) 454 9699 (mornings only)

**E-mail:** ncrc@barnardos.ie  
www.barnardos.ie

## **Clarecare**

Harmony Row,  
Ennis,  
Co. Clare.

**Tel:** (065) 682 8178

## **Cork and Ross Family Centre**

34 Paul Street,  
Cork.

**Tel:** (021) 427 3213

**E-mail:** stannescork@eircom.net

## **Doras Buí,**

Parents Alone Resource Centre,  
Bunratty Drive,  
Coolock,  
Dublin 17.

**Tel:** (01) 848 1872 / 848 1116

**E-mail:** info@dorasbui.ie  
www.dorasbui.ie

## **Family Mediation Service**

Floor 1,  
St. Stephens Green House,  
Earlsfort Terrace,  
Dublin 2.

**Tel:** (01) 634 4320

**E-mail:** fmearlsfort@oceanfree.net  
www.fsa.ie

## **Gingerbread**

Carmichael House,  
Brunswick Street,  
Dublin 7.

**Tel:** (01) 814 6618 (10:30 - 1:30)

**E-mail:** info@gingerbread.ie  
www.gingerbread.ie

## **Limerick Social Service Centre**

Henry Street,  
Limerick.

**Tel:** (061) 314111 / 314213

**E-mail:** lssc@eircom.net

**Marriage and Relationships  
Counselling Services,**

38 Upper Fitzwilliam Street,  
Dublin 2.

**Tel:** (01) 679 9341

**E-mail:** mrcs@eircom.net

**Mediators Institute of Ireland**

Montana House,  
Whitechurch,  
Dublin 16.

**Tel:** (01) 284 7121

**E-mail:** info@themii.ie

www.themii.ie

**National Association of Widows  
in Ireland**

12 Upper Ormond Quay,  
Dublin 7.

**Tel:** (01) 677 0977

**One Family**

Cherish House  
2 Lower Pembroke Street  
Dublin 2.

**Tel:** (01) 662 9212

**E-mail:** info@cherish.ie

www.cherish.ie

**One Parent Exchange and Network  
(Open) A network of one parent  
groups.**

7 Red Cow Lane,  
Smithfield,  
Dublin 7.

**Tel:** (01) 832 0264

**E-mail:** enquiries@oneparent.ie

www.oneparent.ie

**Parentline**

(helpline for parents under stress)

Monday - Friday 10am - 9.30pm

**Tel:** (01) 873 3500

**E-mail:** parentline@eircom.net

www.parentline.ie

**Rainbows Ireland**

*A peer support programme to assist  
children, adolescents and adults who  
are grieving a death, separation or  
other painful transition in their family.*

The Loreto Centre,  
Crumlin,  
Dublin 12.

**Tel:** (01) 473 4175

**E-mail:** rainbowsireland@eircom.net

www.rainbowsireland.com

**Sligo Social Service Centre**

Charles Street,  
Sligo.

**Tel:** (071) 45682 / 43838

**E-mail:** sligosocialservices@eircom.net

**Treoir,  
National Information Centre for  
Unmarried Parents**

14 Gandon House,  
Custom House Square,  
IFSC,  
Dublin 1.

**LoCall** 1890 252 084

**Tel:** (01) 6700 120

**E-mail:** info@treoir.ie www.treoir.ie

# Family Mediation Service

## FULL TIME OFFICES

### DUBLIN

1st Floor, St Stephen's Green House,  
Earlsfort Terrace,  
Dublin 2.  
Phone: (01) 6344320  
Fax: (01) 6622339

### CORK

Hibernian House,  
80A South Mall,  
Cork.  
Phone: (021) 4252200  
Fax: (021) 4251331

### GALWAY

1st Floor, Ross House,  
Merchant's Road,  
Galway.  
Phone: (091) 509730  
Fax: (091) 567623

### LIMERICK

1st Floor, Mill House,  
Henry Street,  
Limerick.  
Phone: (061) 214310  
Fax: (061) 312225

## PART-TIME OFFICES

### ATHLONE

Suite 10, 1st Floor,  
Inish Carraig Business Centre,  
Golden Island, Athlone, Co.  
Westmeath.  
Phone: (0906) 420970  
Fax: (0906) 477011

#### Opening Hrs:

Mon & Tue 9am to 1pm, 2pm to 5pm.  
Wed 9am to 12.30pm (admin cover)

### BLANCHARDSTOWN

West End House, West End Business  
Park, Snugborough Road Extension,  
Blanchardstown, Dublin 15.  
Phone: (01) 8118650  
Fax: (01) 8211877

#### Opening Hrs:

Mon 9am to 12.30pm  
Thurs & Fri 9am to 1pm, 2pm to 5pm.

### CASTLEBAR

c/o Family Centre, Chapel St.,  
Castlebar,  
Co. Mayo.  
Phone: (094) 9035120  
Fax: (094) 9037811

#### Opening Hrs:

Mon 9am to 12.30pm (admin cover)  
Tue & Wed 9am to 1pm, 2pm to 5pm.

### RAHENY

Skillings House, 1st floor offices,  
Raheny Shopping Centre,  
Howth Rd.,  
Dublin 5.  
Phone (01)8510730  
Fax: (01)8511267

#### Opening Hrs:

Wed 9am to 12.30pm (Admin cover)  
Thurs & Fri 9am to 1pm, 2pm to 5pm.

### DUNDALK

10, Seatown Place, Dundalk,  
Co. Louth.  
Phone: (042) 9359410  
Fax: (042) 9338514

#### Opening Hrs:

Wed 9am to 12.30pm  
Tue & Thurs 9.30am to 1pm,  
2pm to 5.30pm.

**SLIGO**

Abbey Street,  
Sligo.

Phone: (071) 9137430

Fax: (071) 9146401

**Opening Hrs:**

Mon & Tue 9am to 1pm, 2pm to 5pm.

Wed 9am to 12.30pm.

**LETTERKENNY**

Riverfront House, Pearse Rd,  
Letterkenny,  
Co Donegal.

Phone : (074) 9102240

Fax : (074) 9125680

**Opening Hrs:**

Mon and Tues 9am to 1pm,  
2pm to 5pm.

Wed 9am to 12.30pm (admin cover)

**TALLAGHT**

The Rere,  
Tallaght Social Services Centre,  
The Square, Tallaght,  
Dublin 24.

Phone: (01) 4145180

Fax: (01) 4625956

**Opening Hrs:**

Mon 9am to 12.30pm (admin cover)

Tues and Wed 9am to 1pm,  
2pm to 5pm.

**TRALEE**

Unit 2, Market Place,  
Main Street, Tralee,  
Co. Kerry.

Phone: (066) 7186100

Fax: (066) 7129332

**Opening Hrs:**

Mon & Tue 9am to 1pm, 2pm to 5pm.

Fri 9am to 12.30pm (admin cover)

**WATERFORD**

13B Wallace House,  
Maritana Gate, Canada St,  
Waterford.

Phone (051) 860460

**Opening Hrs:**

Mon & Tue 9am to 1pm, 2pm to 5pm.

Wed 9am to 12.30pm (admin cover)

**WEXFORD**

32 Key West,  
Custom House Quay,  
Wexford.

Tel: (053) 63050

Fax: (053) 23576

**Opening Hrs:**

Tues & Wed 9am to 1pm, 2pm to 5pm.

Thur 9am to 12.30pm (admin cover)

**PORTLAOISE**

Grattan House Business Park,  
Dublin Rd, Portlaoise,  
Co Laois.

Phone: (057) 8695736

Fax (057) 8695723

**Opening Hrs:**

Tues and Wed 9am to 1pm &  
2pm to 5pm

Thurs 9am to 12.30pm

# Treoir Information Leaflets

- 1.** The Children Act 1997 (guardianship by agreement, access by family members)
- 2.** The Non-Fatal Offences against the Person Act 1997 (harassment, child abduction)
- 3.** Guardianship
- 4.** Access, Custody
- 5.** Shared parenting
- 6.** Rights of unmarried fathers
- 7.** Maintenance of children
- 8.** Family adoption
- 9.** Passport applications
- 10.** Birth registration
- 11.** Cohabitation
- 12.** Unmarried parents and equality legislation
- 13.** Establishing Paternity

Births to women under 20 1985- 2005

Births outside marriage 1990 - 2006

# Treoir Publications

**“Being there for them”** – for grandparents of children whose parents are not married to each other.

Funded by the Crisis Pregnancy Agency

## **Bulletin**

regular information for unmarried parents and those involved with them.

## **Family Links: steps and stages**

shared parenting and step families. (€5)

Funded by the the Family Support Agency

## **Information for young parents in education**

Funded by the Crisis Pregnancy Agency

## **Information Pack for parents who are not married to each other**

Funded by the Crisis Pregnancy Agency

**Reproductive Health information for Migrant Women** available in Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Polish, Romanian and Russian. Available in a manual or CD format -

Funded by the Crisis Pregnancy Agency

**Newsletter** – for workers with young parents

**Taking the Stand** – a guide for unmarried parents resolving disputes regarding care of their children. (€5)

**Work it Out!** – a guide for parents on One-Parent Family Payment (re)entering the workforce or education

Funded by the Department of Social and Family Affairs

**Young Parent Survival Guide** – a great magazine for young mums and dads.

Funded by the Crisis Pregnancy Agency



# Web based only Publications

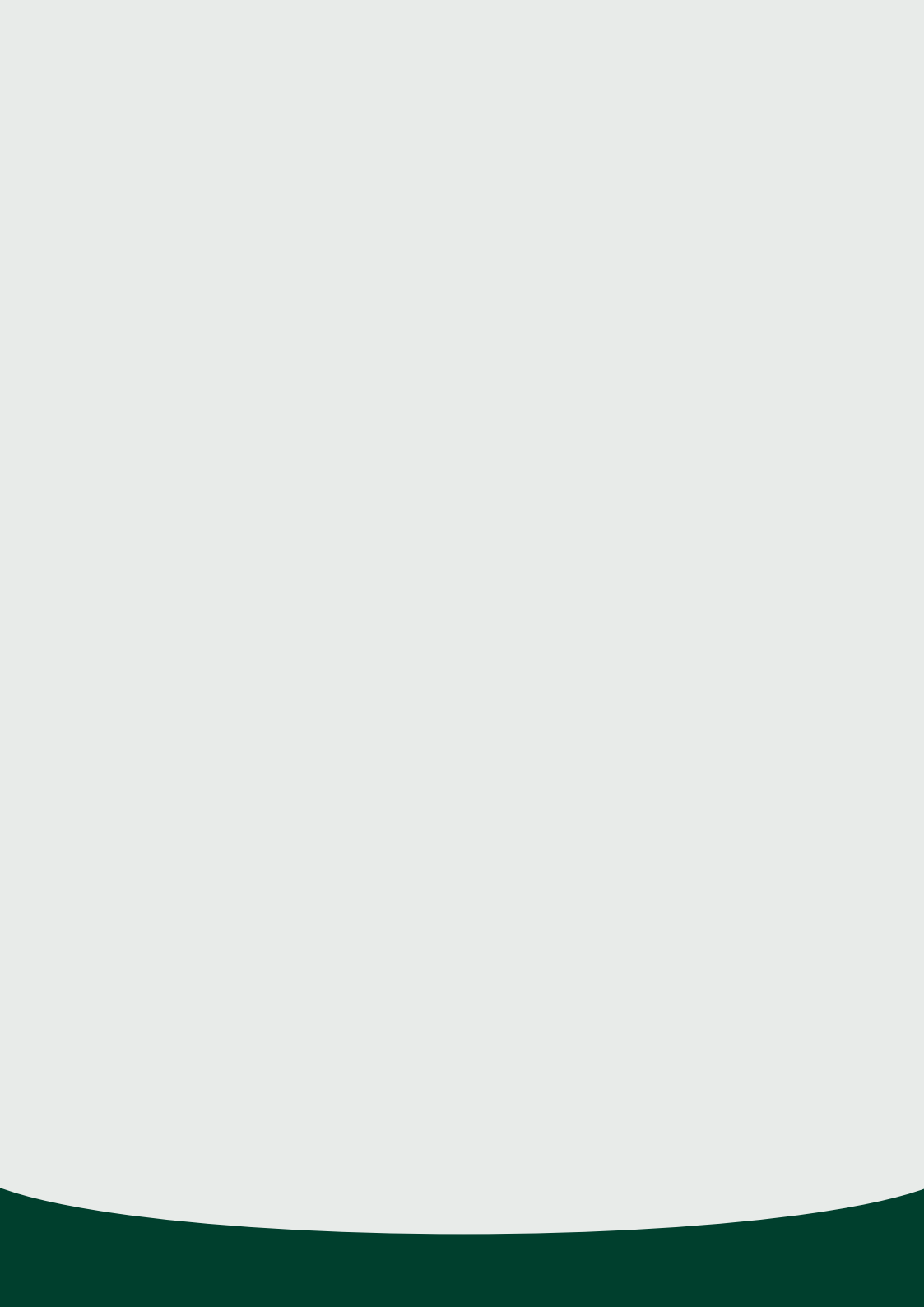
**Legal information for unmarried migrant parents**  
available in Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Polish,  
Romanian and Russian

Funded by the Crisis Pregnancy Agency

**Pregnant and thinking about adoption**

**Useful Services Database**







The National Federation of Services  
for parents who are not married  
to each other

**LoCall: 1890 252 084**

14 Gandon House, Custom House Square,  
IFSC, Dublin 1  
01 6700 120 [info@treoir.ie](mailto:info@treoir.ie) [www.treoir.ie](http://www.treoir.ie)



*Funded by the*

**Family Support Agency**