

Practical Changes that Children Face when Parents Separate

- **Loss of daily contact with one parent.** This is the most fundamental change. Whatever the relationship with that parent has been, this child will miss the absent parent and will usually have to adapt to seeing him or her at pre-arranged times away from the family home. So, there is a sense of loss and longing which may have to be concealed from the resident parent, giving rise to feelings of guilt and confusion.
- **Adapting to ‘handovers’**, when children go from one parent to another. These times can be painful and emotionally charged, particularly if there is open conflict at that point. Children may also worry about the parent left behind, whether they will be alright, and may be fearful about whether they will be there when they get back.
- **Coping with parents who are not fully able to parent.** Children may have a sense of responsibility for either or both parents, who are very often deeply unhappy at this point. Parents often struggle to be available to children, but they may need support themselves. Children can sometimes take on this role.
- **Adapting to new ways of seeing a parent**, which may be unlike anything they have experienced before. The time spent with the non-resident parent may feel forced and false, full of unaccustomed treats and frenetic activity.
- **Coping with parental conflict.** If parental conflict is high, children may be questioned about the other parents’ life or have to cope with negative remarks.
- **Adapting to new ‘relatives’.** Children may have to adapt to a new family, both at home and on contact visits: step parents, step siblings, all with needs of their own, who will compete for the precious attention of their parents. It can be particularly difficult for children to accept that the absent parent, usually the father, lives with other children, who see him on a daily basis, while their time with their parent is rationed.
- **Adapting to different house rules.** There may be a whole set of different house rules in the different homes. In some cases, children have different



Turn arguments... into agreements

sets of toys and clothes in each house which they are not allowed to move with them, so that they have to manage two sets of living arrangements.

- **New financial constraints.** One of the parents may have to work more, and thus be less available than previously, or old treats may have to be foregone.
- **House moves and school moves.** These may mean that support from nearby family and friends is less available.