

# Gingerbread

## Single parents, equal families

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Making arrangements for your children

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### **Contact between your children and their parents**

Most parents are able to make effective arrangements between themselves, but others need some help. This page will help you make effective arrangements for your child about where they live, and when they spend time with each parent and their family and friends.

These are important decisions for all the family, and there are many things to consider, so it may take time to find an arrangement that works for you all.

Whatever arrangements you make, the important thing is that you have tried your best to come to an arrangement that's best for your child and for you as a family. Find out more about making arrangements when [you and your child's other parent can't agree](#).

In this guide:

- [How to make arrangements](#)
- [Supporting your child](#)
- [Changing arrangements](#)
- [Tips to making your contact arrangements work](#)

## **How to make arrangements**

Every situation is different and your family needs to make decisions that work best for everyone involved. Some decisions will be easy to make and some will be hard. Below are some useful tips to help you have effective conversations and ensure the best outcomes for your child.

### **Prepare**

Be prepared for the conversations you need to have about the arrangements for your child. Decide what aspects you need to agree on, which of these are most important and what information you need to help you make these decisions. Find a neutral place to talk away from your child, and think beforehand about what compromises you're prepared to make.

### **Focus on your child's needs**

When parents separate, emotions can run high and it can be hard to know what to do for the best. Working out what is in the best interests of your child can be a challenge. Whatever your feelings, it's really important to put your child's needs first. These needs will vary depending on: their age, health, abilities, life and family experiences and their personality.

It's helpful to consider the following:

- The age of your child – babies and younger children will have different needs to older children
- The wishes and feelings of your child, taking into account their age and understanding
- The likely effect on your child of any changes in their circumstances
- Where your child's friends and other relatives live, and how your child will continue to see them
- Where your child goes to school, and whether they have any special classes or out of school activities.

### **Be as open and honest as possible**

This applies to your thoughts and feelings as well as information about your future plans. Try to explain the reasons behind the arrangements you're proposing and why they would be most suitable for your child.

### **Try to see it from the other side**

Trying to understand the concerns of the other parent will help your child have better relationships with you both. This is easier said than done when you're hurt and angry, but try to listen to what is being said and respond to that. Understanding your own feelings can help you understand the other point of view.

### **Take one step at a time**

Try to deal with one issue at a time and agree on the easier things first. Use a priority list if you feel the discussion is going off track. If you feel you're getting stuck, or emotions are running high, try meeting at a different time.

## **Be practical**

When considering when your child will be spending time with each parent, you need to be realistic about the day-to-day practicalities, which will be different for each family.

Some things you might want to consider:

- How will your child get to and from school or childcare?
- If you have more than one child, do they have different needs which require different arrangements?
- If your child sleeps over at both parents' houses, is there enough room and what are the sleeping arrangements?
- How will the things your child needs on a day to day basis be available for them?
- What will the travel arrangements be and who will take responsibility for them?
- What help and resources do you have access to?

## **Think through the options**

Suggest as many options as you can for how and when your child spends time with each of you, and try to find solutions to practical problems.

## **Supporting your child**

Most parents want to do their best for their children, so keep your child at the heart of the decision about where your child lives and when they spend time with each parent.

## **Relationship with both parents**

Children have a right to a relationship with both their parents and it's important that you and your child's other parent listen to your children, and understand their needs and wishes before making decisions.

Some families have an arrangement where the child spends significant time (including overnight stays) with both parents. This is known as shared residence or shared care. This option is one to consider when you're making your decision about where your child lives. Good communication about day-to-day issues and a willingness to be flexible will make this type of arrangement work best.

## **When a parent doesn't want to be involved**

Each family is different and for some having a relationship with both parents won't be possible, whether through choice or safety concerns. Sometimes a child's parent doesn't want to be involved in their life. There could be many reasons for this, which are hard to understand. You can't force a parent to be involved, but you can ensure you've done all you can to encourage it.

## **Your child's best interests**

Where parents do want to be involved in the child's life and it is safe for this to happen, it's usually in the child's best interest if:

- They are brought-up by both parents, whether or not they live together

- Each parent supports their child to enjoy a positive relationship with their other parent
- Children are clear about the arrangements for spending time with each parent, and there are no sudden changes in arrangements unless it's unavoidable
- Children are not exposed to continuing conflict; this is both distressing and harmful for them
- Children are supported to keep in touch with important people in their lives, such as wider family members
- New partners support the arrangements you've made, and have a good relationship with your child.
- Keep in mind that it is the ability to communicate, the quality of the relationships, and the ability to focus on how things will work for the child that make an arrangement work well.

In addition to this advice, there are some simple ways you can support your child through the process of making contact arrangements:

### **Don't argue or fight in front of your child**

If you're finding it difficult to come to an agreement without arguing, don't do this within earshot of your child, even if you're on the phone. It is hurtful and distressing for them, and can damage your relationship.

### **Communicate with your child**

Your son or daughter may be worrying about things that have not occurred to you. It is common for children to blame themselves for their parents' separation. Explain that it's not their fault, and keep reassuring them. This is particularly important for younger children.

You may feel you're protecting your child by not telling them what's going on, but you could be doing the opposite. Children want to be involved and listened to, but they should not be expected to make the final decisions about what happens. Often children are not aware of their parents' problems and a separation may be a real shock to them. Give your child time to adjust to their new situation.

### **If you are concerned for the safety of your child**

Domestic violence and other forms of abusive, inappropriate, unsafe or destructive behaviour can make it unsafe for a child to have contact with their other parent. In these circumstances, you're likely to need legal help when making arrangements for your child.

It can be possible for a child in these circumstances to still have a relationship with their parent, as long as there's a safe way for this to happen. It may be that a child's time with that parent needs to be supervised, or for contact to take place in a contact centre.

If you're concerned for the safety of your child, get help and advice as soon as you can (in the first instance this may be the police, social services, NSPCC or legal help). See the bottom of this page for organisations that can help.

### **Changing arrangements**

#### **Written agreements**

When an agreement is made you should all be clear about what's going to happen. Some parents find it helpful to write down the arrangement to avoid confusion or disagreements later on. Be aware that although something is written down it doesn't make it legally binding. Arrangements will need to change if they're not working for your child.

### **Reviewing arrangements**

The decisions you make don't have to be set in stone. If you're struggling to reach an agreement or aren't sure what will work, suggest trying an arrangement and setting a date to review it. You should be prepared to review arrangements as your child grows up and circumstances change.

### **Flexible arrangements for older children**

As your child gets older they will have their own opinions on what works for them, and will have their own plans and interests to consider. Older children are likely to need more flexible arrangements. If it's in your child's best interest to change the arrangement, and you all agree, you can do so at any time.

### **Court orders for contact arrangements**

If a court has decided when your child should be spending time with each parent and an order is in place you can still change the arrangement, but you should get some legal advice first.

Tips to making your contact arrangements work

Click below to see some tips on arranging contact between your child and their other parent.

### **Plan ahead**

It helps to plan so that everyone knows where they stand and to avoid misunderstandings. If it's difficult to plan ahead, for example if you work shifts, try to agree some basic guidelines.

These could include how many days a week a child spends with each parent and how much notice you should both give. If there's a school trip or a friend's party that affects the usual arrangements, give the other parent as much notice as you can.

### **Avoid sudden changes to plans if possible**

It's difficult for everyone if plans change at short notice, but this will sometimes happen. Try to be as flexible as you can, but review arrangements if they frequently need changing at short notice.

### **Agree arrangements for significant days**

Try to agree in advance how your child will spend important dates, such as birthdays and religious festivals. It's common for parents to take turns seeing their children on special days, alternating each year. Older children should be involved in the decisions.

### **Make arrangements for holidays**

It's easier to reach an agreement by planning ahead. It's common for parents to share school holidays. Depending on your child's age and understanding, he or she could be involved in planning the arrangements so they feel included and secure.

If you or your child's other parent are worried about your child going away, share as much information as possible about the trip. This could include travel and accommodation arrangements, and contact details.

## **Taking a child abroad**

Depending on whether your child's other parent has parental responsibility, you may need consent to take your child abroad. If your child has a relationship with their other parent and sees them regularly, let them know the travel arrangements, even if you don't need their consent:

- If you're the only person with parental responsibility – you don't need the consent of the other parent to take your child abroad.
- If there's someone else with parental responsibility – you need their consent unless you have a residence order or child arrangements order where you are named as the parent with residence – see below.
- If you have a child arrangements order or a residence order stating that your child lives with you – you can take them abroad for up to one month without the consent of anyone else with parental responsibility, unless there is a court order preventing you.
- If you have a child arrangements order which stipulates when your child stays with each parent – you will need to stick to arrangement in the order, so in practice, you will probably need consent so that you don't break the terms of the order.

## **Get support when things feel difficult**

You might want to share your experiences and get support from friends or other single parents who have been through a similar situation. Joining a support group or online forum such as a Gingerbread group or the Gingerbread forum can be helpful and supportive.

Single parent community

[Visit our forum](#)

[Join a Gingerbread local group](#)

Further support

If you would like more information on making arrangements for your children, there are several organisations you can contact.

### **For advice**

Child Maintenance Options

0800 988 0988

[www.cmoptions.org](http://www.cmoptions.org)

Provides information on setting up child maintenance payments and how to make a claim to the Child Maintenance Service.

Dad.info

[www.dad.info](http://www.dad.info)

Advice, information and a forum for dads.

Family Rights Group

0808 801 0366  
www.frg.org.uk

Confidential advice for parents and other family members of children who are involved with children's services.

Relate

0300 100 1234  
www.relate.org.uk

Offers a range of services for couples, families and individuals and supports them at all stages of their relationships.

Reunite

0116 2556 234  
www.reunite.org

Charity which provides advice, information and support on all issues related to international parental child abduction, prevention of abduction, international contact issues, and cases of permission to remove a child from the jurisdiction.

### **For safety concerns**

NSPCC

0808 800 5000  
www.nspcc.org.uk

For help if you are concerned about a child's safety.

Legal support

- [Child Law Advice Service](#)
- [Civil Legal Advice](#)
- [Resolution Foundation](#)
- [Rights of Women](#)

Safety

It's important you feel safe when making contact arrangements. Contact these organisations if you have concerns about your family's safety.

[National Domestic Violence Helpline](#)

Mediation

Family mediation can help you and your child's other partner come to an agreement about contact arrangements.

[The Family Mediation Council](#) [National Family Mediation](#)

Want to speak to other single parents?

## [Explore our forum](#)

### About Gingerbread

We're the leading national charity working with single parent families. We provide expert advice, practical support and campaign for single mums and dads.

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