

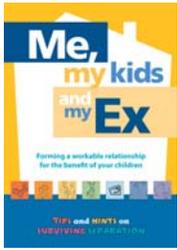
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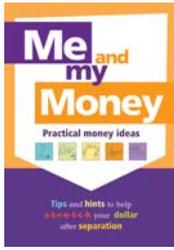
Parenting from a Distance



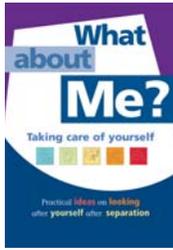
TIPS and **HINTS** to help you
BUILD ON your **RELATIONSHIP**
with your children after **SEPARATION**



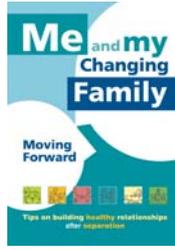
Providing helpful tips and hints on reducing conflict and building a workable relationship with the other parent for the benefit of the kids.



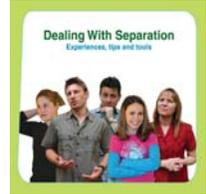
Addresses the challenges that arise around money issues following separation. Includes hints and tips on stretching your dollar further.



Helping separated people deal with emotional issues such as anxiety with suggestions and resources for dealing with them.



Deals with issues that affect separated families when parents re-partner. Includes tips on building healthy relationships after separation.



An interactive CD Rom where real people in real situations share their experiences, tips and tools about navigating their way through separation.

Disclaimer

The information in this publication is provided as a guide only on the understanding that the Australian Government is not providing professional advice. The Child Support Agency recommends that users seek professional advice for their particular circumstances.

Although every care has been taken in preparing this publication the Child Support Agency gives no warranty or guarantee for the accuracy, currency or completeness of the information. Further, the Child Support Agency accepts no responsibility or liability for any loss or damage suffered as a result of reliance on the information contained in this publication.

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book has been written for separated parents who spend much of their time away from their children. However it may also be useful to those who do most of the parenting.

It may help you:

- become more involved in your children's lives
- build stronger relationships with your children
- communicate effectively with the other parent about the children
- overcome the problems of staying in touch at a distance

A WORD OF ADVICE

You want to be able to continue having a great relationship with your kids after separation. This means you will need to focus on the kids rather than your ex-partner. You will need to be parents together rather than partners.

Separation is often a time of conflict between adults. This is very damaging to children. It can also put at risk having a good relationship with your kids. If violent and abusive behaviours are affecting your relationships — seek help.

You can do something about this!



See page 37 for information on Useful Contacts

A sad note

Not all parents are able to continue a relationship with their children after separation. There are no easy solutions to these difficult situations. Talk to someone whose job it is to help sort out issues.

As you read this book keep asking yourself:

**What sort of
parent do I
want to be?**

**What kind
of thoughts
do I want my
children to
have of me?**

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

- Start anywhere.
- Find something that interests you and start reading.
- Choose some of the ideas you like.
- Make a short list, date it and stick it on the fridge.
- See how you go for a few weeks — add ideas of your own.

Do this each month. Keep updating your plan.

People with their own experience of parenting from a distance have contributed to this book. They have had to tackle the hard questions personally.

Whatever you are going through we can tell you that things can change for the better over time.

GOOD LUCK!

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INTRODUCTION

**Breaking up was bad enough.
I'm not going to lose touch with my kids.**

You are feeling the loss of that everyday contact and you believe your children miss you too. You may not always be sure of the best way to be involved with your children.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- Work on your relationship with the children.
- Aim to minimise conflict with their other parent.
- Look after yourself.

This book deals with each of these areas.



**Remember — you are important to your children.
Make contact and hang in there for them.**



Maybe they'd be better off without me...

Even if you live a long way from your children, you are still their parent. No matter who your children live with, they need and deserve to know that they are loved and wanted by both of their parents.

Children can be frightened by the strong emotions that often come from parental break-ups. You may have to work to regain their trust. Your children need to feel safe with you. This can take time.

Studies support the importance of children generally having both parents in their lives. This helps their self-esteem, well-being and their success in life as they get the benefit of both parents' strengths and experience.

You cannot be replaced by a new partner or by anyone else.



YOU'RE NOT ALONE

It's okay to ask for help — it might surprise you to see how supportive people can be. You don't know until you ask! For example, if you want to buy your child a birthday present but aren't sure what to get, ask a friend or family member for some ideas.

Talk to family and friends about your experiences and find out what they did in similar situations.

Don't become isolated. Try....

- Having family and friends around when you are with the children. This shows kids life is normal and gives them other role models.
- Joining recreational clubs, cultural or religious social groups, adult education courses, English classes and activities.
- Courses for separated parents or do a parenting course.
- Join a support network with others from cultural or religious groups.

Other things you can do.

- Talk to an elder or respected relative.
- Solve the problems you can deal with. This will boost your confidence.
- Look forward, not backward.
- Let your children see that you are getting on with life.

Suggestions and support are just a phone call away. Contact your local parent line, community centre, migrant or Indigenous resources centre.

Go out — even when it's difficult

TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

Separation is a time of great stress. You may have trouble sleeping or not feel like eating. You may feel suddenly angry or upset, or not feel like mixing with people.

Tips

- Don't overuse alcohol, drugs or food to avoid your problems.
- Rest and relax. You may want to meditate or pray. Listen to music or the radio. Read the paper or watch a movie.
- Exercise gets you out of the house and burns up anger and stress in a positive way. You might like to try playing a sport or joining a club.
- Don't forget to eat. Fresh fruit and vegetables don't need a lot of cooking.

Contact your local community centre for information on exercise, low cost recipes and managing stress

Your local Citizens' Advice Bureau will help you with contacts.

YOU AND YOUR CHILD

KEEPING CONTACT ALIVE

**I realise I don't know my kids
as well as I thought!**

Separation often means you have to parent one-to-one for the first time. This can be a challenge!

At the same time it is a new chance to get to know your child as a person and show them they are important to you.

Ways you can get to know them better

- Do you know their day-to-day routine? What do they do after school? Do they have sport, music or dance lessons? Are they learning another language? What time do they eat dinner and when do they play, do homework and go to bed?
- To start the ball rolling, have some questions up your sleeve. What are their favourite songs, games, TV shows and sports? Who are their friends? What do they want to be when they grow up? What places in Australia or the world would they like to visit and why?
- Note in your diary or a notebook, birthdays, special days or cultural/religious days that are important to you and your children. Use this information to help you plan activities, buy birthday presents, organise events with extended family or follow up important things like exams.



**Kids have their own ways of doing things.
Let them know you love them for who they are.**

KEEPING CONTACT ALIVE

Talking on the phone is just not the same...

Phone calls can't replace being with your children but they are a great way of staying in touch. Whatever happens, you are making contact and kids realise that you care.

- Try ringing at regular times so your children can expect and look forward to your calls.
- Find a time when they will be relaxed and not expected to be doing homework, eating dinner, rushing out to sports practice etc.
- Regular short chats may be better with young children. Call sometimes just to say goodnight, share a joke or tell them about something funny that happened to you — even if it's just for a couple of minutes.
- Teenagers may not say very much but they do like regular contact. Long silences can be normal. Don't give up. It doesn't mean you are not important to them.

Some practical ideas...

Get pre-paid phone cards so your child can ring you.

Find out about other phone services like telecards and charging calls to your account.

Get started — pick up the phone

KEEPING CONTACT ALIVE

I don't know what to say...

Think about what you are going to say before you pick up the phone. The more you talk with your children, the more things will flow and you will discover how special they are.

- Arrange to help with schoolwork over the phone. Listen to them do their times tables, homework essays or even music practice over the phone.
- What have they been doing since the last time you talked? Show that you are interested in what they do when they are not with you. Keeping notes in a diary or calendar can help.
- Talk to them about the ordinary things that happened to you when you were a kid, or things you liked. This will help your kids to share their experiences with you.
- You don't need to have instant solutions to their problems. Just listen to what they say and show interest.
- Help children talk about the bad as well as the good things. Ask them about how they are feeling as well as what they are doing.
- Tell them you love them before you hang up.



This is your chance to get to know your kids better.
Don't blow it by asking questions about their other parent.

KEEPING CONTACT ALIVE

How else can I stay in touch?

You can have a great relationship with your kids even though you don't live together all the time. Here are other things you can try.

Letters/Cards

Kids love to receive letters. Even if you live close-by, they will be happy to get a card, a note or something that shows you have been thinking of them. Put down in writing what you find hard to say.

Mobile Phone — SMS

Short Message Service (SMS) text messages are fast and cheap.

Audio and video tapes

Young children love to hear their parents' voices. Record yourself reading their favourite book or singing songs you both like.

Fax

Fax machines are a great way to send short notes.

Email

If you can, get your children on-line. Kids can use email to tell you what they are doing or thinking at the moment. You will probably find out things they don't talk about over the phone or in a letter.

Internet

There are many free web services you can use. These include kids and parenting sites with free games that you can play on-line together.

Use search engines to help with school projects, homework or your child's hobbies.

For other ideas, see Parenting from a Distance, page 27

Get your kids to teach you how to use the internet!

KEEPING CONTACT ALIVE

How else can I be involved in my children's lives?

Staying involved means doing things you may never have done before. School and sports clubs like to have parents involved. This way you'll really get to know your kids.

School

- Ask your child's school to send you copies of newsletters, school reports and notices. Is some of the material translated into your preferred language? It lets your kids know that you are interested in their education and that they are special to you.
- Help with school projects or homework by finding information and sending it to them.
- Attend events when you can.
- Offer to help with general school events, committees, social events, even chocolate drives, selling raffle tickets, working bees.
- Try to make time to help in the classroom. Primary schools and kindys are glad to have parents read or sing to children.

Ground rule

Respect the
other parent's
arrangements



Keep the school up to date with your phone number and address. Are you available to be an emergency contact?

Work on building a relationship of trust.
This can take time.

Other activities

- What sort of sports or activities do your kids do outside of school? Discuss with their other parent how you can help.
- Arrange to go along to practices, performances, events and gatherings.
- Offer to help with fundraising, team management or transport.

Offer to help in any way you can.
Your children will love seeing you involved.

WHEN YOUR CHILD COMES TO STAY

I get so up-tight before I see them!

It's understandable. You want things to go smoothly and you want your kids to relax and enjoy themselves.

It helps to plan ahead. Know who is collecting or dropping off the children and where this will take place. Call the other parent a few days before to be clear on the arrangements and make sure there are no surprises.

Start in good form — turn up, be on time, be reliable.

Contact the children before the visit

- Remind them when you will see them next.
- Let them help plan your time together.
- Remind them of any special things they may need to bring.

If you do the day-to-day parenting...

Let your child know it is okay for them to visit the other parent. Try to make it something they look forward to.

Ground rule

Don't use your kids to pass messages to their other parent



A range of Government payments and services is available to help parents, even if they are not caring for their children full time. For more information visit www.centrelink.gov.au

WHEN YOUR CHILD COMES TO STAY

How can I make my place feel like our home?

It helps to think of your child as having two homes, one with Mum and one with Dad.

- If you move house consider living close by — within cycling distance of school if possible.
- Give them a room of their own and let them help with decorating.
- If they can't have a room, give them a space of their own that they don't have to share with others. A cupboard, desk, bookcase or storage box is okay.
- Display family photos and things that have special meaning for you all.
- Find toys, books and games they like. Try your local toy library or garage sales. Let your kids help.
- Include some outside games: bats, balls, frisbees, bikes. Go to the local park where there's room for the kids to kick a ball or play on the swings.
- Avoid hassles about the basics and keep things at your place like toothbrushes, pyjamas, socks, underwear, t-shirts, shorts and their medicines.
- A basic first aid kit could include children's paracetamol, bandaids, antiseptic wipes, etc.

Make sure you've got food they will eat in the fridge!



WHEN YOUR CHILD COMES TO STAY

I don't know what to do with them...

You don't need to go on exciting outings or have expensive toys for them to play with. It is the time you spend together that is important.

- Give them time to settle in. They may go through feeling emotional 'jet-lag' each time they move between homes.
- Involve them in the routine of the house. Sit down with them and make a list of meals they would like. Make a shopping list and do the shopping together. Get them to help with the cooking.
- Do ordinary things together like go for a walk, or try something more challenging like indoor rock climbing. Check the paper for school holiday activities.
- Try to spend some one-to-one time with each child. Read to them, watch TV or videos together and talk about what you have seen.
- A hug, a kiss or a play-fight are all ways to say that you love them.
- Do things with family and friends. Visit grandparents and cousins. Have the kids bring their friends over.

Ground rule

Don't criticise your children's other parent in front of them. It will only hurt you and your children in the long run.



The best gift
you can give
your children
is your time.



WHEN YOUR CHILD COMES TO STAY

I thought they'd got over these tantrums.

Change affects children in many ways. When they first arrive at your place they may go through a whole range of emotions like being teary, picky, short-fused, etc. It can be a difficult time for them.

Studies show that young children often don't want to leave their other parent. They may feel torn between the two of you. They may be too young to express themselves or it can be just too hard for them to talk about things. Any distress is likely to come out in their behaviour.



My teenager is really playing up...

Change in routine is unsettling, even for teenagers. They are becoming independent of their parents and looking for their own time and space. The more you pressure them the more they may react.

Find out what is happening in the rest of their lives. It may help to talk this over with their other parent. Let them bring a friend along. Understanding your child will help you make better parenting decisions.

Some kids may become more angry and difficult.
Others may be quiet and moody.

WHEN YOUR CHILD COMES TO STAY

Understanding behaviour

Understanding your child's behaviour can be difficult. There are lots of books available to give you ideas and information on what to expect from kids at different ages.

What you can do

- Be honest. Tell your children that you know separation is hard for everyone and that they are not to blame.
- Let young children bring a special toy or blanket to have with them at both homes.
- Give older children time and space and encourage them to continue with their own routines of sport or other activities.
- Try to understand that your children are not just being difficult.
- Help them to talk about how they are feeling, even to cry if they feel like it.
- Give them hugs and show affection.

*Children and Separation:
a guide for parents*

and

*Questions and answers
about separation for children*

are available from your
local Family Court Registry

See the Useful
Contacts
on page
37 for more
information

Parent lines...

*can give you information
and hints on what your
kids are going through.
You can find their phone
number in the White
Pages of the telephone
directory.*

WHEN YOUR CHILD COMES TO STAY

Some challenges!

I try so hard to get my kids to like me...

Sometimes separated parents go overboard by trying to be extra nice. Children still need firm boundaries. Kids learn to cope well with different rules in both homes.

- Decide on the ground rules for your home, including bedtimes, jobs to be done and discipline. It may help to talk this through with their other parent. Establish a routine.
- Praise good behaviour and set consequences for undesirable behaviour.

They didn't want to see me last time...

It can hurt when your child doesn't feel able to spend time with you. They may feel torn between both parents. They may even be frightened of the anger if you have been fighting a lot with their other parent. Take things slowly.

- Respect your child's wishes. Tell them you will still be there when they feel able to see you. Stay involved by keeping up contact by phone, letter or email.
- Accept short visits. Younger kids may not want to sleep over but may be happy to spend the day with you.
- Realise that older children sometimes want to stay at a friend's house instead.
- Understand that your kids may not feel comfortable with your new partner or friend. Some things take time.

Contact your local parent line or step-family association for more information on understanding what it's like for children in step-families.

WHEN YOUR CHILD COMES TO STAY

My ex suddenly wants to change our arrangement!

Is it a reasonable request and does it benefit the children? If so, try to be flexible — you may want to do the same thing yourself some day.

Handover times are so stressful!

- Make changeovers as natural and as friendly as possible.
- Be reliable about sending back children's personal things like clothes and toys.
- If you can't avoid arguing, arrange pick-up at a neutral place or talk to your local community services about 'contact services' that provide a safe place for changeover to happen.
- Sort out any issues with their other parent away from the children.
- Don't walk into their other parent's house without permission.

Studies show that children adapt to separation. It's ongoing conflict between parents that hurts kids.

Ground rule

Be considerate.
Call if you are running late.



WHEN YOUR CHILD COMES TO STAY

I wish I could remember...

Many parents like to keep records of their child's contact visits. This is a useful way to remember plans for the next visit, any promises you made to your kids or other things you want to remember.

Keep a special diary or calendar and include:

- Things you did together and future plans.
- Meals your kids liked (or didn't like).
- Good things that happened.
- New things you learned about your child.
- Any upsets or illnesses during the visit, or behaviour you didn't understand.
- Your child's height and weight, or new learning skills.
- Things you bought them for birthdays or cultural/religious events like Christmas or New Year.
- Agreements with their other parent to change your contact arrangements. It's easy to forget what was agreed.

Keeping a diary or scrapbook with notes and photos can be fun for you and your child. It can also be useful for recording information you want to pass on to their other parent.



Did you know that children can be included on more than one Medicare card?

For more information call Medicare on 132 011 or visit the website www.medicareaustralia.gov.au

YOU AND THEIR OTHER PARENT

BUILDING THE BUSINESS RELATIONSHIP OF PARENTING

**The kids and I are fine...
but I dread talking to my ex!**

Studies show that after separation you may have a lot of different feelings towards your ex-partner, or be left with guilt or anger. These feelings can last several years, particularly if you found the break-up hard to accept.

Meanwhile you are trying to be a good parent. Fighting with the other parent makes it hard for both of you. The effect on children may be anxiety and distress or problems at school.

What can I do to change the way we relate?

- Get support for yourself. Being able to sort through your own feelings will put you in a better position to discuss your children with their other parent.
- It may help to view the relationship with their other parent as simply like that of workmates — for the sake of the children. A positive business relationship will lead to more and better quality time between you and your children — even if you never resolve all your arguments!

See page 37 for websites on parenting and emotional issues of separation. Try www.parenting.sa.gov.au

Your actions speak louder than words.
Treat their other parent how you'd like to be treated yourself.

BUILDING THE BUSINESS RELATIONSHIP OF PARENTING

How do I talk to my ex about the kids?

Finding new ways to talk to the other parent can be difficult. It can be harder to respect each other's point of view than when you were together. But it is worth it. Children feel reassured when they know their mum and dad can calmly discuss the best way to look after them. Your kids need your support in getting on with their own lives knowing they're not caught in the middle.

If you can't spend a few minutes chatting at the end of contact or at a school function, you can practice being respectful, saying hello, and avoiding conflict! Kids appreciate it when mum and dad try getting on okay.

If you can, talk in a relaxed, neutral place like a local coffee shop. This way you are both more likely to be polite to each other. If you live a long way apart make a time to talk on the phone when the kids aren't around.

Ground rule

Be considerate.
Ring the other parent at a convenient time.

Remember you are both doing this for your children!

PARENTING TOGETHER WHILE APART

We're meeting soon. How can I make sure it goes OK?

Arrange the time and place without involving the children. Have a game plan to help you stay on track. Prepare some notes you can look at.

Before

- Try to agree in advance what the meeting is about.
- Arrange to talk away from the children. Make phone calls when they are out at sport or visiting friends.

Ground rule

Never ask children to take sides or choose one parent over the other.

At the meeting

- Stick to what you have agreed.
- Agree on the easy things first.
- If you lose track, look at your notes. Otherwise you could say something you'll regret.
- Don't get stuck arguing about the past.
- Stay calm — you're both good at pushing each other's buttons.
- End the meeting by finding something positive to say about the kids.

In case of conflict

- Stop and think — is this helping or making things worse?
- Decide — do we need outside help so we can talk about the children?
- Consider counselling or mediation — talk to someone whose job it is to help parents sort out issues.

Do not discuss issues if either parent is affected by drugs or alcohol.

See page 37 for support services like the Family Court of Australia and the Family Relationship Advice Line.

PARENTING TOGETHER WHILE APART

What else can I do?

Remember you are parents for life... maybe even grandparents! If talking to the other parent is difficult, sometimes a trusted go-between can be helpful. Be sensitive who you use.

Don't be surprised if things work out very differently to how you expect. Let your words and actions show that you are committed to parenting for the long-haul.

Try different approaches in the way you relate until you find what works. Be open to changes as the children grow older.

Things you can both do

- Accept that the relationship has ended.
- Listen. We all need to feel heard.
- Give it time.
- Plan not to be angry forever.
- Accept the other parent's new choices.
- Support the other parent the way you would like to be supported.

Resentment may lead to arguments about money. Try not to let money issues get in the way.

If it seems unfair, remember it probably feels unfair to their other parent too!

Consider

- What sort of parent do I want to be?
- What kind of thoughts do I want my children to have of me?

PARENTING DECISION-MAKING CHECKLIST

This is a list of decisions you may need to make with the other parent.

Considering these will make life easier for you and your children. Be flexible and keep your child's interests in mind.

Agree on the easy things first and return to the hard ones later. Good luck!

Where will the children live?

- Weekdays
- Weekends
- Nights/days
- Public holidays
- During school terms
- During school holidays
- Over Christmas and other special days
- If you are sick
- If your child is sick

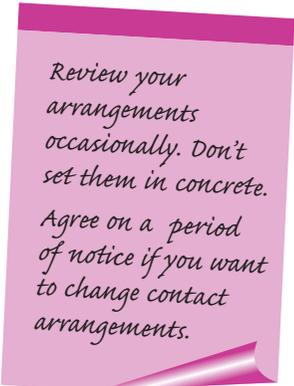
Use diaries to record decisions and be specific about dates and periods of time.

How will you arrange:

- Pick ups and drop offs
- Birthdays or other cultural/religious events
- Attendance at special events like school sports day. Can you both go?
- Contact with grandparents and other extended family
- Contact and overnight stays with the children's friends
- Calls/emails from one parent while the child is with their other parent
- Transport arrangements: between homes/to school/dance/sport etc.
- Child support

Where will they attend?

- School
- Church/mosque/temple/synagogue or other spiritual/religious place
- Other activities



Review your arrangements occasionally. Don't set them in concrete. Agree on a period of notice if you want to change contact arrangements.

Who will pay for the kids'...?

- Transport between your homes
- Local taxis/buses/trains
- Clothing
- Health care/health insurance/dentist and orthodontist/glasses/contact lenses/counselling, etc.
- Child care
- School fees/tuition/books
- Extracurricular activities/excursions/socials/pocket money
- Long distance transport. Air fares/trains/buses
- Other expenses

Different ways of paying child support can be arranged. Contact the Child Support Agency to find out more about payment options. See page 37 for contact details.

How will you share information?

- School communications/reports/photos
- Medical records including details of any medication
- Information on visits to doctor/dentist/counsellors etc.
- Information on important events: sporting/religious/special activities/news of extended family etc.

Ground rule
Write down your decisions. Be courteous.

Try to agree:

- To share phone numbers in case you need to contact children.
- To inform the other parent about any changes to important phone numbers.
- How to make changes to any of these arrangements.
- To work towards a consistent approach to discipline.

Can you agree not to:

- Put the other parent down to the children.
- Make big changes like moving house, changing schools without prior discussion.
- Plan activities during their other parent's time.
- Make decisions that have important cultural or religious implications.
- Argue in front of the kids.

PARENTING FROM A DISTANCE

Divorce, separation and work mean that many parents don't get to see and hug their kids as much as they would like to.

If you have to live far apart, reassure your kids they will still have contact with you

Budgeting for time together may be a reason to change your child support assessment. See page 37 for Child Support Agency contact details.

If you can't move closer to your children, there are still lots of ways to stay involved.

HOW CAN I STAY IN TOUCH?

The next few pages have some practical ideas. Decide on trying some each week. Knowing how and when you will next be in contact gives you all something to look forward to.

If you do most of the parenting you can help by:

- Encouraging their other parent's involvement by helping the child mail drawings or letters.
- Arranging for the children to be at home when they are expecting a phone call from their other parent.
- Preparing them for when they are with their other parent.

Show your ex-partner you appreciate their help in keeping up contact with your kids — no matter how little this may seem at times.

PHONE CALLS

Plan what you want to say before you ring.

Arrange for your children to be able to ring you

- Organise a phonecard or reverse charge number so your child can contact you when they want to.
- Some mobile phone plans can limit the amount of time available. You can get phones to receive calls only, or program them just to call your number.

Think about why you are calling — is it to talk to the kids or do you need an excuse to talk to the ex? If so, make a separate time.

Activities you can share over the phone

- Bedtime stories.
- Keeping up with sports results.
- Watching the same TV show, movie, or reading the same book to discuss later.
- Planning your next visit together.



Think low budget

- Email and letters are cheaper than phone calls.
- Small personal presents cost less and are more meaningful than expensive trendy items.
- Find a phone plan to suit you. Some mobile deals allow free time at night.
- Text messages are cheap and good fun.

See page 32 for ideas for presents.

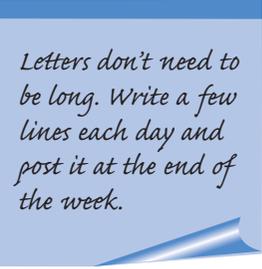
Listen to your children when they do call.

LETTERS

A letter allows you to express things you can't say over the phone. It also shows that you put in time and effort into staying in touch with your kids.

For small children include

- Family photos
- A pressed flower or a leaf from your garden
- The comic or joke section from your newspaper
- Stamps/foreign money/stickers
- Drawings
- Quiz questions, Top Ten lists (what I like about you, my new home etc.)
- Something from your workplace
- Messages and news from other members of your family e.g. grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles, close friends. Get them to collect things to send the children too
- Photo stamps



Letters don't need to be long. Write a few lines each day and post it at the end of the week.

Play games by letter

- Noughts and crosses
- Hangman
- Quizzes
- Chess/Chequers

Use unusual or funny things to write your letters on

- Coloured paper
- Wrappers or pictures from magazines
- Serviettes
- Travel or work stationery, postcards etc.
- Use coloured or different pens

Faxes or emails...

- are good ways to share homework over a long distance.

Be reliable — stick with what you start.
Do things that are interesting to you too.

EMAIL AND INTERNET

If you have access to a computer, emails are cheaper than phone calls and more direct than letters. There are many free chat services, or you can go on a virtual tour together through websites like NASA and Questacon. Try a visit to sites like ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corporation) or Disneyland with your kids. Send them a joke.

Warn your children of the dangers of chatting with strangers.

Email and internet may be available at the local library, school or community centre, or ask a friend if you can use their machine.

AUDIO AND VIDEOTAPES

(great for younger children)

- Borrow a storybook from the library and record a tape of a bedtime story. Your child can get the same book from their library and listen to the tape you've sent.
- Tape good luck messages for important events such as sports days and exams. Your child will treasure them.
- Tape a special episode of their favourite TV program. Send it with a letter about how much you enjoyed watching it 'with' them.
- Make a video or photo story of your day at work or home.
- Get someone to video your child playing sport and send it to you.
- Send blank video tapes for them to make copies of school concerts and other special occasions.
- Ask them if they can borrow a video camera and make a home movie for you.



GETTING YOUR KIDS TO REPLY

Sometimes you may feel that you do all the work. Children don't always reply but they will value your contact and the efforts you have made.

Be patient and don't expect too much. After all, you are doing it for them. Treat anything you get back as a bonus.

Try sending your children:

- Their own special stationery for them to use.
- Self-addressed and stamped envelopes.
- Pre-paid Australia Post envelopes for them to send small items.
- Craft items, such as pens and paper for them to draw something for you.
- Blank tapes with post packs and stamps ready for mailing back.
- A disposable camera. Get them to send it back to you for processing their photos.

Keep a scrapbook/album of all the letters, photos, artwork etc. that they send you.

Sit down and look through it when you are together.

Let them know you would love to get one of their drawings, a photo of them or a copy of their latest schoolwork.

OTHER IDEAS

Keep a pet (fish aren't too demanding), or even a plant, that you can choose and care for 'together'. Send photo or email updates.

Run your own footy tipping competition.

Offer to buy fundraising items sold through the school, sponsor 40 Hour Famine etc. Sell raffle tickets for your child's sports team or school.

Keep up extended family connections by writing a family history together:

- Make a list of relatives to contact and plan what sort of information to gather.
- Look on the Internet for information about family trees.
- Share information with your children about your cultural heritage.

PRESENTS

It's easy to go overboard — you don't need to be a 'Disneyland parent'. Parents who don't live with their children sometimes feel guilty and think they have to buy big presents for their kids. This puts pressure on their other parent. You can't buy your kids' love.

Here's a list of some small everyday presents that will remind your kids of you.

- Books (especially in a series)
- Magazine subscriptions
- Colourful socks, hats and small items of clothing
- Things to eat or drink from — mugs, spoons, lunch boxes
- Their own calendar with special dates marked in — grandmother's birthday etc., Christmas advent calendar
- Badges/pins/combs/brushes/toothbrushes/hair clips and ribbons
- Start a collection of something your child is interested in e.g. comics, shells, rocks, sports cards, bookmarks, matchbox cars, doll's house furniture, fridge magnets, erasers, stamps. Send some regularly and keep some for visits
- Photographs of you doing special things e.g. writing their name in the sand at the beach, or holding a painting they have sent you
- A photograph from your childhood with a story. Frame it if it is special
- An album or scrap book for them to keep the photos and notes you send
- A special teddy bear or toy to hug when they miss you

Keep a record so that you don't send the same thing twice!



Something special does not have to cost much. Collect small things to show you are thinking of them:

- Pictures, articles, information for school projects or things that interest them: hobbies/sports/careers
- If you travel, collect everyday items for your children e.g. small toys, foreign money, sweets, hats, postcards etc.
- Freebies from shows or other events
- Special offers/competitions from the back of cereal packets, chocolate bars, soft drinks, magazines etc. in your child's name
- Red Nose Day/Daffodil Day badges etc.

It will help if things will fit in the letterbox and don't have to be collected from the post office.



Think before you send.
Be sensitive about how the other parent or kids might feel.

PLANNING TIME TOGETHER

Make your arrangements well ahead of time. You and your kids will enjoy making plans together. It also keeps things clear with their other parent.

What will you need to do to budget for your time together?

Consider safety of travel arrangements when your children travel to see you:

- Can someone travel with them?
- Who will meet them?
- Talk to the travel service about how to help your child prepare for the trip.

For hints, tips and advice on making the most of your money, ask CSA for a copy of the booklet, *Me and My Money*. Contact CSA on 131 272 or visit the website www.csa.gov.au

WHEN THE KIDS ARRIVE

If you can, sometimes see your child where they live, rather than have them always visit you.

Let them settle in. Give them time to get to know the area. Be prepared for changes to your routine.

Be prepared for physical changes in your child, as well as new behaviour, likes and dislikes.

Have a collection of newspaper cuttings, poems, thoughts and small things in a box or book that you can look through together. Record the dates you collected each thing so your child will know that you often think about them.

See You and your child on pages 14 and 15 for other ways to make your child's stay enjoyable

IMPORTANT PHONE NUMBERS AND INFORMATION

Copy as required – one plan for each child.

CHILD'S NAME:

People in regular contact with your child

Other parent/guardian	Relatives (grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins)
Home	Home
Work	Work
Mobile	Mobile
Other	Other
Pre-school/child care	Sport (coaches/team managers/gyms)
School (teachers, counsellors, after-hours care)	Classes/clubs/other activities (dance, music etc.)
Friends (including friends they walk home with)	Healthcare (doctor, dentist, optician, specialists etc.)
Bus/train/ferry etc.	Other

Emergency numbers

Police	Hospital
Fire	Local doctor
Ambulance	Chemist
Poison information centre	Other

Medical record

Vaccinations	Illnesses
Last tetanus booster	
Operations/general anaesthetic	Allergies/reactions
	Antibiotics
Medicare number	Health fund

Put together a basic first aid kit

IMPORTANT INFORMATION ABOUT YOUR CHILDREN

BE PREPARED!

Do you know what to do in an emergency? Can you step in and take action if your children are in trouble, or support their other parent in an emergency? What are the things you need to do?

This information plan will help you list the important contacts you may need. Tear it out and keep it within reach. Make sure you keep it up to date.

You can also use this plan to:

- help if their other parent is held up through work/transport/car problems
- solve unexpected problems — broken glasses, forgotten sports shoes, homework mislaid etc.
- find out information about your child in case of a medical emergency

INVOLVE THEIR OTHER PARENT

Swap some of the important numbers with their other parent or carers of your children. Show them your list first and ask for their input. They may like a copy for their own use.

INVOLVE YOUR KIDS IN PREPARING THE PLAN

Explain to your children why you have put together this information. Involving them will help you find out more about their activities and day-to-day life. They will also realise how much you care about them.



IMPORTANT INFORMATION ABOUT YOUR CHILDREN

BE PREPARED!

- If you can, give your numbers to the school or child care centre as an emergency contact.
- Give your child a card with your phone numbers on it for their diary or wallet.
- Make sure they have emergency phone money or a phonenumber.
- Organise something like a 'Homelink'[®] phone service.
- If they are old enough, think about a mobile phone with restricted dial-out access.

Include your child on your Medicare card



USEFUL CONTACTS

Disclaimer

This list of resources is provided for your information and convenience only. The Child Support Agency does not accept responsibility for, endorse, monitor or control external resources and is not responsible for their content, services or your access or use of them.

Please note: Extra charges apply to calls made from mobile and public phones

GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

Centrelink

Phone 136 150
www.centrelink.gov.au

Child Support Agency

Phone 131 272
Teletypewriter (TTY) 1800 631 187
www.csa.gov.au

Department of Family, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs

Phone 1300 653 227
www.facsia.gov.au

Department of Human Services

Phone 1300 554 479
www.humanservices.gov.au

Family Assistance Office

Phone 136 150
www.familyassist.gov.au

Family Court of Australia

Phone 1300 352 000
www.familylawcourts.gov.au

Family Relationship Advice Line

Phone 1800 050 321
www.familyrelationships.gov.au

Federal Magistrates Court of Australia

Phone 1300 352 000
www.familylawcourts.gov.au

Legal Aid Offices

www.nla.aust.net.au

Medicare

Phone 132 011
www.medicareaustralia.gov.au

Regional Law Hotline

Phone 1800 050 400

OTHER USEFUL PHONE NUMBERS

Centacare

1300 138 070

Family Services Australia

1300 365 859

Kids Helpline

1800 551 800

Lifeline

131 114

Mensline Australia

1300 789 978

Relationships Australia

1300 364 277

Telephone Interpreting Service

131 450

Useful resources

Links to a range of helpful websites are available at www.csa.gov.au. You'll find information about parenting, relationships, stepfamilies, emotional well-being, financial counselling, child health and safety, parenting from a distance and sites especially for children. There are also contact numbers for Government agencies and other useful organisations.

CSAonline

CSAonline is a secure Internet service where you can view and update your child support information online. To register go to www.csa.gov.au

Need a service in your area?

The Community Service Directory is a list of community service providers located across Australia. Details of services in your area can be accessed by calling **131 272** or on the CSA website www.csa.gov.au.

**They both have
different rules...but
that's OK with me.**

Nicola, 6 years

**One day dad asked me what was
wrong and he listened to me.
Then he spoke to mum about
it and she spoke to me.
I'm a lot happier
about it now.**

Jarred, 16 years

**It's good because you could both
read this and think — that's fair.
It's the little rule book.**

Father

**I would use the foldout list at the back —
the important information is a great idea.**

Mother

**He spoils them rotten.
It's like he's trying
to buy their love.
It's hard to
compete with that.**

Mother

**It's hard to
say no when you
don't see them
very often.**

Father

We hope the ideas in this book help you to stay involved with your kids

**What sort of parent
do you want to be?**