

# *Coping with Separation*



*during COVID-19*



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## You're not alone

Approximately 38 percent of Canadians have separated from their spouses. Separating can be stressful, overwhelming, and emotionally draining during ordinary times. During the COVID-19 pandemic, separating can be even more challenging. This is a difficult time for us all.

This handbook has suggestions from people who've experienced separation. It contains expert advice to help you get through a challenging time in your life.

Suggestions to help you and your family cope during the pandemic are included. The main message is your situation won't always be the way it is now. It *will* get better.

Remember, this is a trying time for everyone. Patience, tolerance, and compassion will help you get through it.

# Understanding your emotions

When you and your **spouse** (the person you're married to or live with in a marriage-like relationship) separate, you have to figure out the legal and financial parts of ending your relationship. You also have to deal with the difficult emotional parts.

Separating is an "up and down" process. You may feel better on some days than on others. You'll feel many different emotions as you go through your separation. Your feelings may be intense, mixed, and unpredictable. For example, you may feel happy and relieved, but also sensitive, anxious, and shaky, or perhaps angry, hurt, and betrayed.

COVID-19 can magnify those emotions. You can feel more easily overwhelmed because of added uncertainties caused by the pandemic, from financial uncertainty to fear about loved ones or yourself becoming ill. Just going out for groceries can be stressful.

During the pandemic, families may experience added conflict from being at home more with young children, teenagers, or young adults, who are also feeling the loss of "normal." Holding a family meeting where everyone feels safe to share their feelings and ideas may help your family find ways to cope with the changes in positive and reassuring ways.

Recognizing and managing your emotions can help you through the separation process. If you have children, be aware of the emotional roller coaster that separation may cause.

Understanding the psychological and emotional issues involved will help you to:

- cope better with the changes to come
- have fewer conflicts with your spouse and children
- help your children cope better
- make better decisions for your future
- reduce costs



## *Loss and changes*

Separation can trigger powerful emotions of loss and grief, whether you and your spouse decided together to end your relationship, or one of you decided.

The loss is at many levels – loss of the dreams and expectations you had for the relationship; loss of someone you may still care for deeply; and loss of your role and identity as a spouse.

Separation of a shared life can bring on changes to your:

- personal routines and structure
- family structure and perhaps your parenting role
- friendships and family relationships, for example, in-laws
- home or neighbourhood
- sexual life
- social activities
- finances, with sometimes a drop in income

These changes can be stressful. Research has shown that separation and divorce are the second-most stressful life events after the death of a loved one.

The pandemic may also cause you and your family to feel the loss of what was once normal and ordinary. Your children may miss school, their friends, and ordinary rites of passage, such as high-school graduation ceremonies. You may miss seeing your friends, parents, grandparents, and cousins, who may be sources of support and comfort.



## Stress

You may feel overwhelmed by everything that's going on – having to tell your children, parents, friends, and co-workers about your separation; dealing with emotions and reactions; moving and dividing your property, possessions, debts, and bank accounts.



You may develop symptoms of stress. Read through this list and check off any that apply to you. This will help you recognize that what you're feeling may be stress.

- insomnia
- tiredness, low energy, can't concentrate or focus
- hair loss (more than normal for you)
- forgetfulness (more than usual)
- anxiety, panic attacks, or feel shaky
- easily agitated, frustrated, and moody
- feelings of loss of control or need to take control
- difficulty in relaxing and quietening your mind
- headaches and neck pain
- upset stomach, including diarrhea, constipation, nausea
- aches, pains, and tense muscles
- frequent colds and infections
- clenched jaw and grinding teeth
- skin problems, or increased skin sensitivity and irritability
- increased use of drugs or alcohol

### ***Get professional help for yourself***

if you aren't coping well, or if your stress gets worse over time. Pay special attention to your and your children's feeling of isolation and loneliness because of the pandemic. Make sure you and your children have social connections and get needed services.

 See *Where to get help* on **pages 33 – 37**.

## ***Emotional stages of separation***

Understanding the emotional stages of separation will help you cope with your emotions. The stages are similar to grieving the death of a loved one. The different stages don't always happen in the order described here. Sometimes people repeat them again and again. Some people take longer than others to go through the emotional separation process.

### **5 emotional stages**

#### ***Shock and denial***

The first stage has been described as "shell shock." When you're overwhelmed, your brain protects you by shutting down strong feelings. You may experience numbness, anxiety, or even nothing as you try to process what's happening.

#### ***Anger***

After the numbness disappears, you may feel resentful, hostile, and unsettled. It's normal to feel angry, but anger can sometimes mask other, more difficult emotions. It can also slow down the grieving process and your healing.

#### ***Transition***

You may feel confused and have emotional ups-and-downs. You may be examining why your relationship ended. You may try to get back together with your spouse. You may feel like you don't care anymore. Or you may be open to talking to your spouse as you make the change from "couple" to "single" and from "we" to "I."

#### ***Acceptance***

At this stage, you'll have accepted your separation and the loss of your relationship. You're ready to move forward. You'll find you can make decisions more easily.

#### ***Meaning***

The stage of finding meaning goes beyond the grief of the loss of your relationship, with its dreams and hopes. This stage of closure changes your grief over your separation into a peaceful and more hopeful experience.





## Coping with your emotions

The practical issues of separation and divorce can create anxiety and stress. These include thinking about your situation, dealing with the legal process, and communicating with your spouse to make decisions.

### *Take it slowly*

Often separating spouses are afraid to move forward because of the uncertainty of the unknown. Their relationship isn't working anymore, even though they've tried counselling and other help. With COVID-19, the uncertainty is even greater and access to services may be limited, increasing your feelings of not knowing what to do or how to do it.

You and your spouse may have already decided to separate, or one of you may have decided before the pandemic started. Separation is a stressful and uncertain time in normal circumstances, and even more so with the unknown factors of COVID-19. Every family's situation is different. You may go ahead with your original plan or change it. Here are some things to think about before you make decisions.

**Recovery can take time — two to three years for some people.**

Keep in mind that you and your spouse may be at different stages at any time. Knowing that can help you work through your emotions.

## Living arrangements

- You and your spouse may decide to make a temporary arrangement to live together but separately in the same home. You would need to consider how to adjust the space to live separately, how to share parenting responsibilities depending on your children's ages, and how to schedule your paid work. The court usually says you're separated if you don't share things like meals, a bedroom, and social activities.
- If you and your spouse have made separate living arrangements and you decide not to move, you may have extra costs, such as a lost deposit because you signed a lease.
- You may decide to go ahead with separate living arrangements. But this may take more time during the pandemic, for example, to find a place or move because of physical distancing.

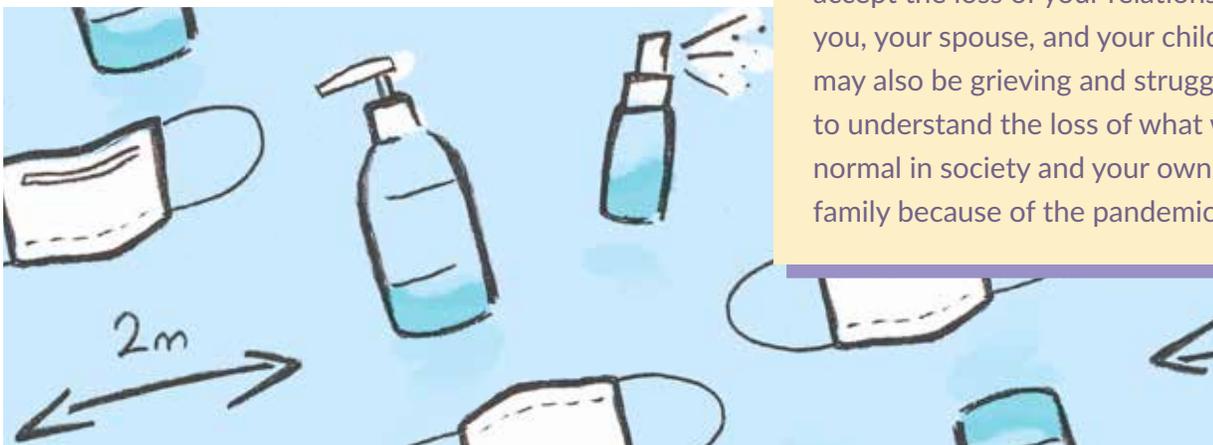
## Financial situation

- Consider your and your spouse's employment situation, your incomes, and debts you have to pay, at least in the short term.
- Get information and advice on financial services that are available if you need help.
- Find out about child support and spousal support and what might apply in your situation.



While your situation may feel overwhelming, information empowers you to make better choices. Rushing through the process of separation or making hasty decisions won't help lessen the emotional pain or hurt you may be experiencing.

👁 See *Where to get help* on **page 32**.



As you struggle to understand and accept the loss of your relationship, you, your spouse, and your children may also be grieving and struggling to understand the loss of what was normal in society and your own family because of the pandemic.



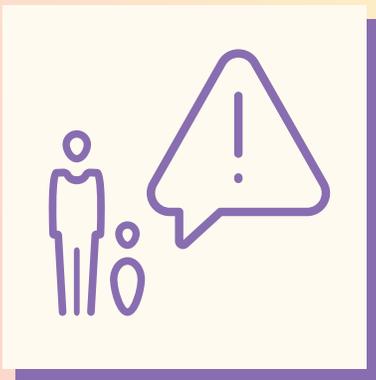
## ***Reduce anxiety about the legal process***

Understanding the laws about separation and divorce will help you feel more in control. Court proceedings during the pandemic are changing to follow public health recommendations. The courts have adapted their services.

### ***Parenting issues***

You or your spouse may be concerned about parenting issues related to the pandemic, such as:

- physical distancing and visits with grandparents, playground activities, shopping
- your or your child's compromised immunity or pre-existing medical conditions
- third-party exposure, others in the household, "risky" behaviour
- online school, daycare, play dates, summer camps, social media
- travel plans
- sharing information about exposure to COVID-19

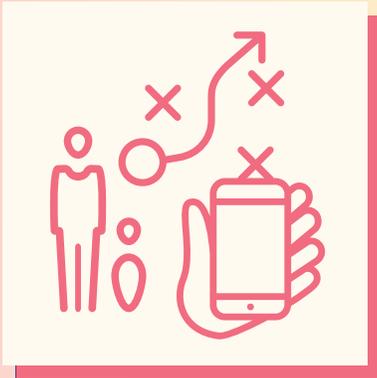


The courts encourage separating families to try to work things out and only go to court if nothing else helps you reach an agreement. Trying to talk to your spouse and using mediation or other dispute resolution methods (see [page 26](#)) could help reduce stress and conflict for you, your spouse, and your children.

Dispute resolution can be faster than court and give you and your spouse more control over what will happen. Many professionals offer online services.

You can also follow some negotiating tips that may help you and your spouse work some things out yourselves.

👁 See *Negotiating tips* on [page 23](#).



If you have an existing parenting plan, or an informal parenting arrangement, try to *respect and follow* it. If you can't follow it exactly, try to follow it the best you can.

Be *reasonable and practical* to make sure your children have meaningful time with both parents. The courts will likely look unfavourably on parents who don't follow pandemic safety protocols, take advantage of the pandemic to deny parenting time, or are unreasonably inflexible about parenting time.

For example, arranging longer visits for children with each parent reduces the number of times the children have to change households and may help keep them safer.

If in-person time with the other parent is reduced, make sure your children's meaningful contact is increased by phone or online. For example, you could use Zoom, WhatsApp, FaceTime, or a similar tool and arrange fun activities, such as storytime or online games.

Think about the best interests of your child. For example, you and the other parent might not agree about your child returning to school. Remember it's normal to be concerned about how a return to school may affect your child's and your health. At the same time, experts agree the risk to children's health is low and they should go back to school *if possible*.

If you try to work out this issue and don't reach an agreement with the other parent, you have to make a court application and a judge decides. The court looks at a variety of factors in the best interests of your child. The court may consider your child's mental health, the quality of online education, peer socialization, caregiving options, and compromised immunity of your household. If the court decides the risks of your child's return to school outweigh the benefits, your child may need to learn online from home.

👁 See the **MyLawBC website** for best interests of the child. ([mylawbc.com/mediation/best-interest-of-child.php](https://mylawbc.com/mediation/best-interest-of-child.php))

Discussing your child's best interests, assessing the risks, and deciding together may not always be easy.

👁 See *Communication tips* on **page 22**.



Techniques and online tools are available to help you communicate with your spouse.

👁 See *Communication help* on page 22.

### **Going to court**

You may have to go to court if you and your spouse can't agree on issues. The uncertainty of how and what issues you can take to court adds stress. You may also have to represent yourself. Or there may be a breakdown in negotiations with your spouse. All these situations can add to your anxiety. To help you deal with these issues:

- See the **Family Law in BC website** and the COVID-19 updates sections for current information about the kinds of issues you can take to court during the pandemic and how the proceeding will be held. ([family.legalaid.bc.ca](http://family.legalaid.bc.ca))
- Find videos and other materials to help you represent yourself, such as the videos on the **Family Law in BC website**. ([family.legalaid.bc.ca/advocates/videos](http://family.legalaid.bc.ca/advocates/videos))
- Get support from an advocate, translator, online support group, or counsellor.
- If you haven't tried mediation, see if that may work for you now. Maybe you or your spouse weren't ready for that when you first separated. Mediation works best when both of you are ready to discuss options for moving on, and if you have children, to make decisions based on their best interests.
  - 👁 If you have to wait for court, see helpful steps on **page 28** you can take now.
  - 👁 See *Legal help* on **page 35**.



## ***Reduce conflict with your spouse***

Your spouse may want to meet with you to talk about the separation and get closure for the loss of the relationship. You may not be ready for that. Or you may not want to do that. Professionals, such as counsellors, can help you.

Parents often try to have a respectful separation as they know they'll be linked a long time. Even if you don't have children, you and your spouse may be linked through the same friends or work.

Everyone will benefit if you and your spouse are considerate with each other during the separation. Remember the times when you cared for each other to help with the difficult task of talking respectfully to each other now.

Also remember, your spouse may also have the same fears and anxiety you have about the separation and pandemic. If you can, follow the advice of Chief Medical Officer Dr. Bonnie Henry to be kind and calm, and encourage others to do the same. Be generous in your actions as you follow BC public health recommendations.

You and your spouse can try to reduce conflict and high emotion between yourselves if personal safety with your spouse isn't a concern.

👁 See *Communication tips* on **page 22**.



## Abuse and family violence

### *If you've been abused in your relationship*

You may be experiencing trauma from abuse as well as the loss and emotions described in this handbook. The tips for self-care and recovery may apply to you, but you have to modify them. You have to make sure you stay safe when you communicate with your spouse. Get help and support for yourself and your children. That's an important step to your recovery.

- 👁 See *Help for you and your spouse (VictimLinkBC)* on **page 33** for help with your emotional recovery.

During COVID-19, the courts will consider your safety and your children's safety an urgent matter.

- 👁 See the **Family Law in BC website** for how to get a protection order. ([family.legalaid.bc.ca/abuse-family-violence/protecting-yourself-your-family/family-law-protection-orders](https://family.legalaid.bc.ca/abuse-family-violence/protecting-yourself-your-family/family-law-protection-orders))

### *If you've been the abuser in your relationship*

Get help to change your behaviour. You'll have to deal with complicated emotional and legal issues. Anger and behaviour management control groups or counsellors who specialize in that area can help you.

- 👁 See *Help for you and your spouse* on **page 33**.



Learn what's abusive behaviour

- 👁 See the **Family Law in BC website** for when behaviour is abuse. ([family.legalaid.bc.ca/scenarios/when-behaviour-abuse](https://family.legalaid.bc.ca/scenarios/when-behaviour-abuse))



## Some coping tips

Here are some things you can do to help cope with the emotions of separation.

### Short term

- Be patient and kind with yourself as you adjust to and accept your situation.
- Make a list of supportive friends and family you can phone or connect with online if you have to keep physically distant, and keep your list handy.
- Ask your family and friends for help with tasks that make you feel pressured.
- Get help with things you may not have done before, such as maintaining household appliances or making daily meals.
- Make a list of counsellors and others you can contact for professional help (see *Emotional help* on [page 34](#)).
- Get help to change negative thoughts into optimism for the future. Negative thoughts and emotions can be bad for your health and overall well-being. Try meditation, including a meditation app. Some apps are free or charge a nominal fee.
- Keep a journal to write down how you're feeling.
- Take time to care for yourself so you can deal with your situation and heal.
- Eat a healthy diet.
- Walk or exercise daily.

Remind yourself that your situation won't always be this way – it *will* get better.

As you work through your separation, your needs may change. You may face new challenges and need help dealing with them.

The legal process may take longer than you expected because of shutdowns during the pandemic.

You may find it difficult to do certain things because of physical distancing. You may feel isolated and alone, especially when your children are with the other parent.

You may be confident about following the health and safety guidelines with your children in your own household, but are anxious about them when they're with the other parent.

Parenting challenges and emotional ups and downs may last longer than you thought.

Get the help you need from your friends, family, or professionals.

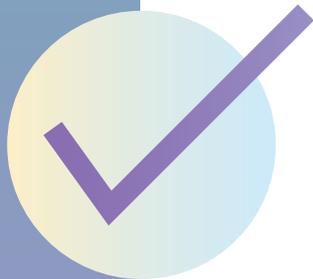
👁 See *Emotional help* on [page 34](#).

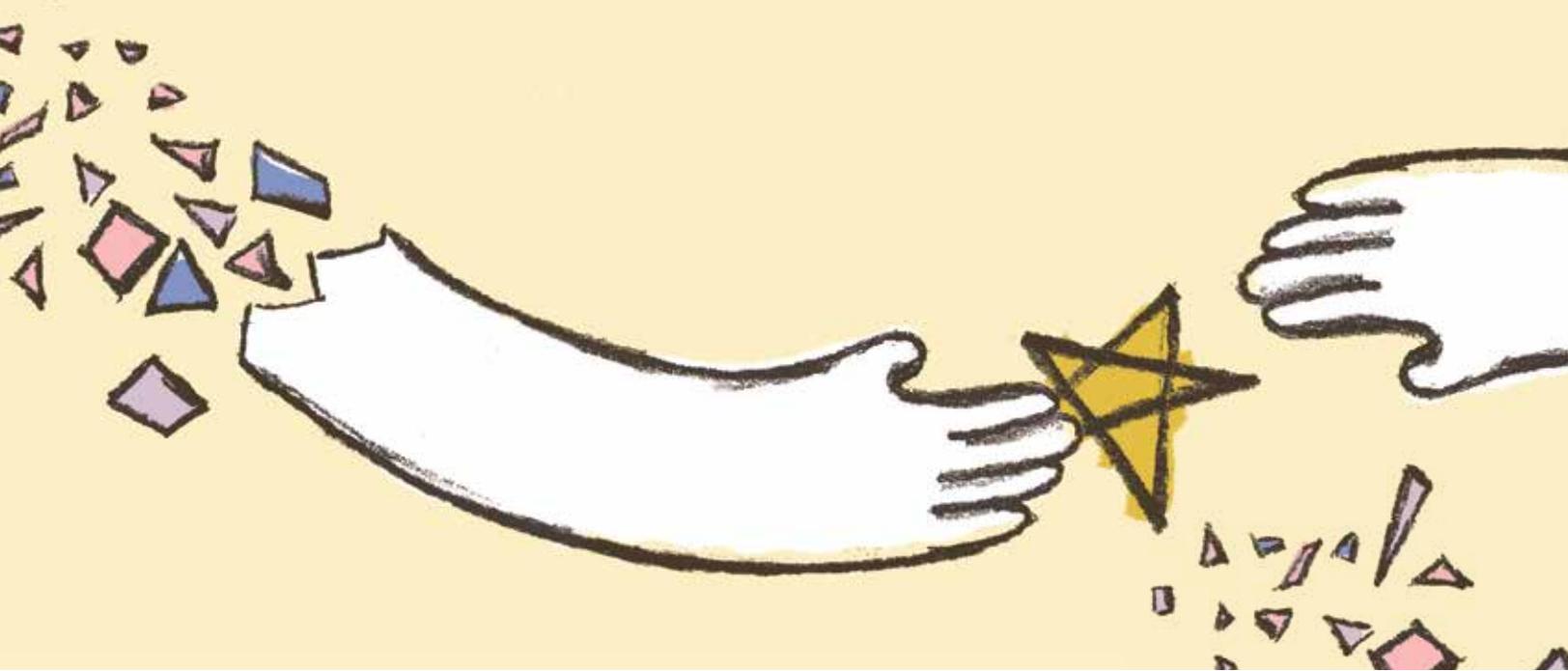


Recognize that everyone is experiencing pandemic-related anxiety. You're not alone.

### *Long term*

- Acknowledge your loss.
- Express your sadness and grief over the end of your relationship.
- Join an exercise class, walking club, or exercise program at your community centre. If you can't do this because of physical distancing, try the exercise programs available online. Many are free.
- Join a social club, such as bridge or climbing, do something you enjoyed in the past, or try something new. Programs are available online, many for free, such as bridge. You may also be able to do some activities by physical distancing.
- Read a new book, or join a book club at your library or community centre when these services are available. Many book clubs are online.
- Volunteer for one-day events, or for a longer time if you can when events are happening.
- Volunteer for a service club or organization. You may be able to help online for now and in person later.
- Explore social media for support and help, and keep in-person connections.
- Take a course online. Many university, college, and continuing education courses are offered for free.
- Use the pandemic as an opportunity to learn the technology that allows you to connect with family and friends near and far.





## Helping your children with their emotions

Your children will also experience a range of emotions when you and your spouse separate.

They can go through stages of grief similar to how people feel when a loved one dies. Your children may feel sad, angry, relieved, or guilty. Their emotions may confuse them. They may:

- blame themselves for your separation
- worry that you and their other parent don't love them, or won't be in their lives
- feel relief that the conflict between you and their other parent will stop
- be afraid you or their other parent will get COVID-19, and they'll lose one of you
- worry they'll get sick with COVID-19
- feel caught in the middle, and angry, sad, and confused because one parent denies parenting time for various reasons, or doesn't follow the parenting guidelines

Your children may or may not understand the situation, or how to cope with it. That depends on their age and how mature they are.

Generally, children want to hear and know that:

- both parents love them, and it's okay to love both parents
- both parents will always be in their lives
- grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and other family will continue to be in their lives
- your separation wasn't their fault

Changes in your children's everyday lives can include:

- moving to a different neighbourhood and school, and having to make new friends
- living part of the time with each parent in different homes
- not living with their sisters or brothers
- possibly having less money for themselves as their parents support two households on the same income

Tuning in to your children's emotions and behaviours can help you guide and support them, including asking professionals to help.

You and your spouse may also be feeling financially uncertain and afraid because of the pandemic. One or both of you may have lost your jobs. You need to reassure your children, even when you may not have the answers.

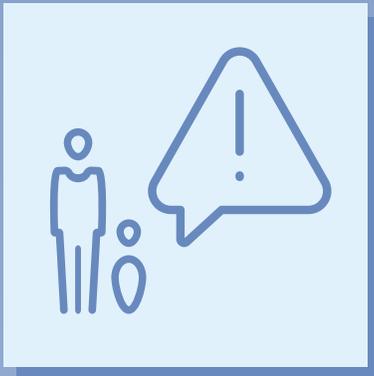


Your children may react strongly to these changes and emotions. This is normal and to be expected.



If you and your children are feeling overwhelmed, get support and help for them and yourself.

👁 See *Where to get help* on page 36 and page 37.



## ***Common signs of stress in children***

Stressed children may:

- cry more than usual
- burst out in anger
- act irritable or moody
- sleep poorly or too much or too little
- eat too much or too little
- cling to an adult or thing
- not settle with the other parent after the usual adjustment time
- go back to younger behaviour in sleeping, eating, talking, thumb sucking, or bed wetting

In addition, older children may also:

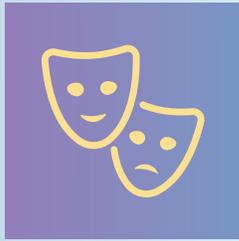
- withdraw from activities they had enjoyed
- withdraw from loved ones
- get headaches and/or stomach aches
- say negative things about themselves, such as “everyone hates me”
- have difficulty at school
- act more hostile toward parents than expected from normal teens

With your love and reassurance, over time your children should feel their situation improve. They may need support from friends, grandparents, or other family they can't visit as they did before the pandemic. Try to keep these supports in place for them in other ways.

You could give them more time on their phone, computer, tablet, or the home phone. In addition to connecting through technology, you may also want to arrange meetings at a physical distance between your children and their friends and other family.

If things don't improve or get worse over time, your children may need extra support and professional help. Certain behaviours in older children show they need help. For example, if they:

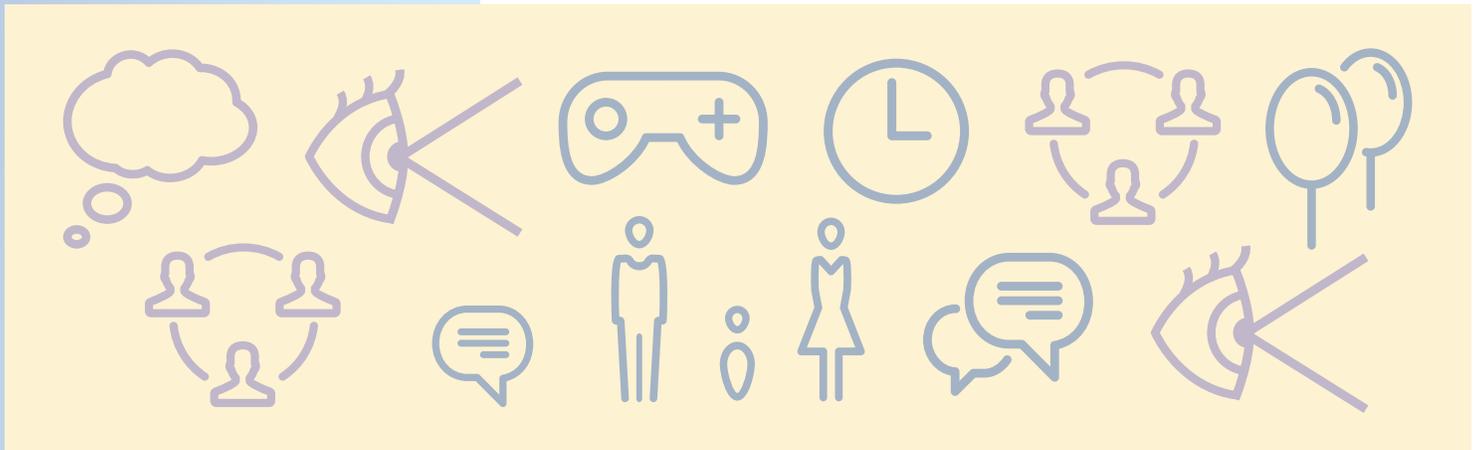
- hurt or cut themselves
- use drugs and alcohol
- act out in unexpected ways



## *Some things to do and not do*

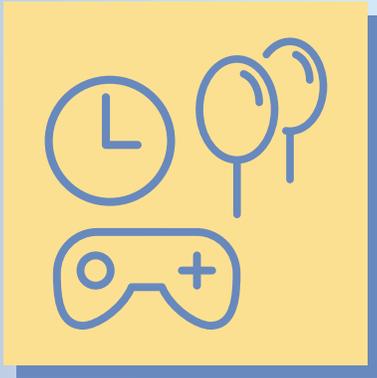
You and your spouse will need to decide about parenting responsibilities, time, and contact with your children. Think about what's best for them.

Encourage your spouse to do the same. If you both focus on your children's needs, health, and emotional well-being, you can make better decisions and reduce conflict.



### *Your children's viewpoint*

- ✓ Listen to what your children have to say about schedules and living arrangements. They want to know their feelings matter. Their voices are important.
  - ✓ If your children are older, talk with them about where they might want to go for help to adjust to their new situation; for example, a school counsellor, trusted family friend, or relative.
  - ✗ Don't discuss the "adult stuff" with your children. Protect them as much as you can from details, such as the reasons your relationship with your spouse ended.
  - ✗ Don't confide in your children. This will add to their emotional conflict. Save your confidences for a friend.
- 👁 See the **BC Hear the Child Society website** for a roster (list) of specially trained people to interview children. ([hearthechild.ca](http://hearthechild.ca))



### *Your children's activities*

- ✔ Make changes slowly. Try to stick to routines and structure as the family reorganizes. For example, continue family rituals around holidays, birthdays, and other special occasions. The comfort of routines will help your children cope. If you can't continue these because of the pandemic, think of alternatives that can still provide similar structure.
- ✔ Try to come up with a shared plan with your spouse so there's structure, stability, and consistency in both homes; for example, for your children's homework, chores, and house rules.
- ✔ Have a conversation with your spouse to make sure you both agree about how you'll follow the chief medical officer's public health recommendations. Try to have the same safety rules in both homes.
- ✘ Don't schedule activities during your spouse's parenting time.
- ✘ Don't criticize your children's activities with your spouse.





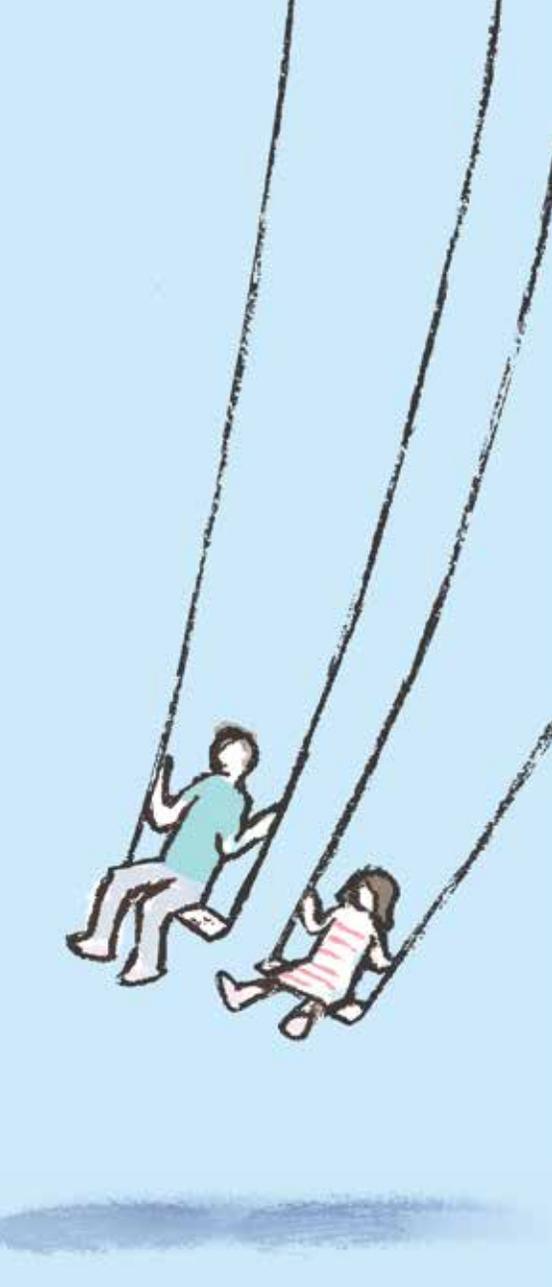
### *Your children's network*

- ✓ Try to map out with your spouse the existing supports your children have, such as grandparents or other extended family, friends, trusted coaches, and after-school activities. Try to come up with a shared plan to keep your children connected to this support network.
- ✓ Going from a one-home family to a two-home family is a big change for everyone. Think about how it can be done so your children can manage the changes. For example, wait until the school year ends to move to a new home and school. Or move to a new home and let your children stay at their same school.
- ✓ You may want to tell your children's school counsellor that you've separated. Then you can make a plan with the counsellor to help your children cope.
- ✗ Don't use your children to deliver personal messages to your spouse, friends, or relatives.



### *Your children's other parent*

- ✓ Treat your spouse politely and with respect, even if you may not feel like it. Treat them as your children's other parent, not your former spouse. Think of your spouse as a business partner in the business of raising your children.
- ✓ If your spouse asks for additional time to take your children to a special event, try to be flexible. Think of the benefit for your children. You can arrange to make up for the time you missed with your children.
- ✗ Don't say that one parent is the "good one" and the other is the "bad one," whatever the reason for your separation.
- ✗ Don't be negative about your spouse or insult them in front of your children. This will put your children in emotional conflict.



### *Other things you can do to help your children cope*

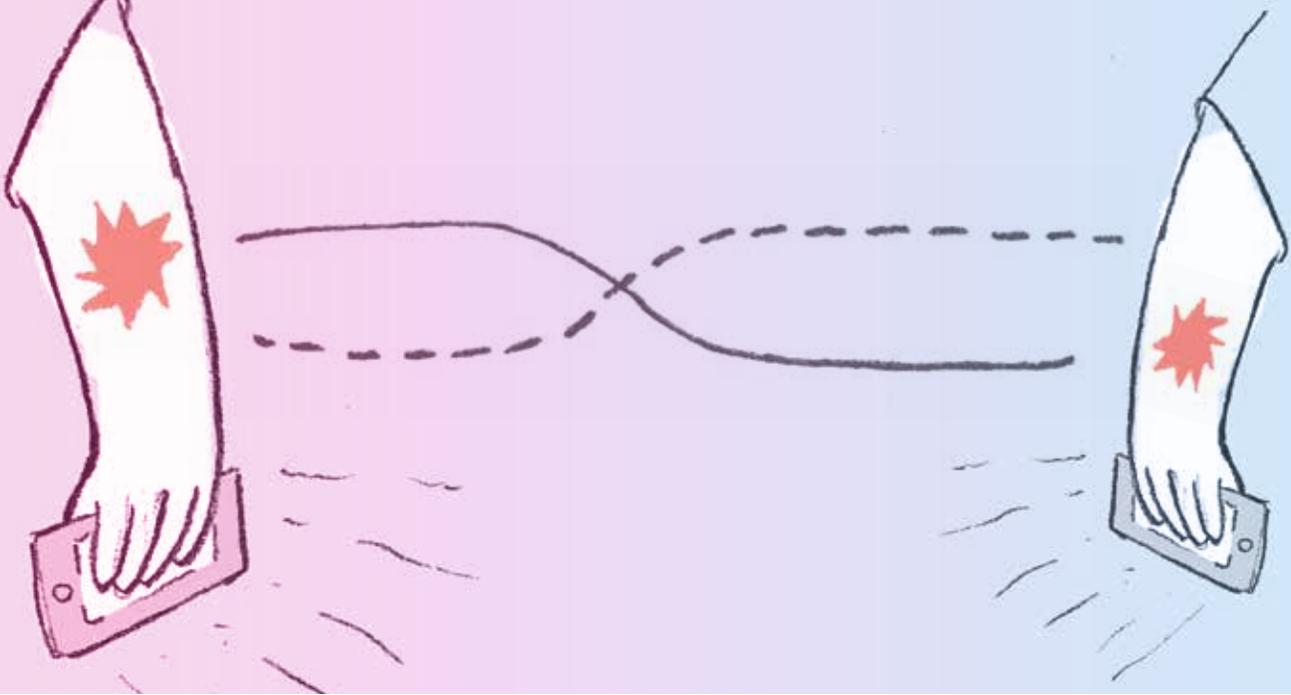
- ✓ Spend special time alone with your children. Give them love and hugs. Let them know they'll be taken good care of.
- ✓ Listen to what they have to say. Let them show their feelings, allow them to be honest, and recognize how they feel.
- ✓ Be patient – you may be the target of anger that isn't about you.
- ✓ Use services meant for children and teens to help them understand they're not alone in this situation, and they'll get through it, along with their parents.

Get professional help for your children if they're not coping well, or if their stress gets worse over time.

👁 See *Help for your children* on **page 37**.

Get professional help for yourself if you need it, so you can better help your children cope.

👁 See *Help for you and your spouse* on **page 33**.



## Negotiating with your spouse

As you try to work things out, you and your spouse may not agree about what's in the best interests of your children.

Here are some communication and negotiating tips to help you and the other parent solve parenting and other issues and make an agreement during the pandemic. An **agreement** is a written plan that sets out what's important for your children, money, home, and other property.

### *Communication tips*

Following these tips may help you to make decisions about finances, legal matters, or parenting.

- Decide how you'll communicate with each other. If you find talking is difficult, email or text each other. Then you'll have more time to respond calmly and thoughtfully.
- If you decide to meet in person, choose a public place, such as a coffee shop.
- Be clear and specific about each issue. Try to be businesslike when you communicate.
- Be polite, even if you don't feel like it. This will set the tone for your communication.
- Avoid making each other angry or interrupting. Keep calm — don't let an issue trigger your emotions.
- Remember you're communicating to make decisions — don't get sidetracked from the topic.

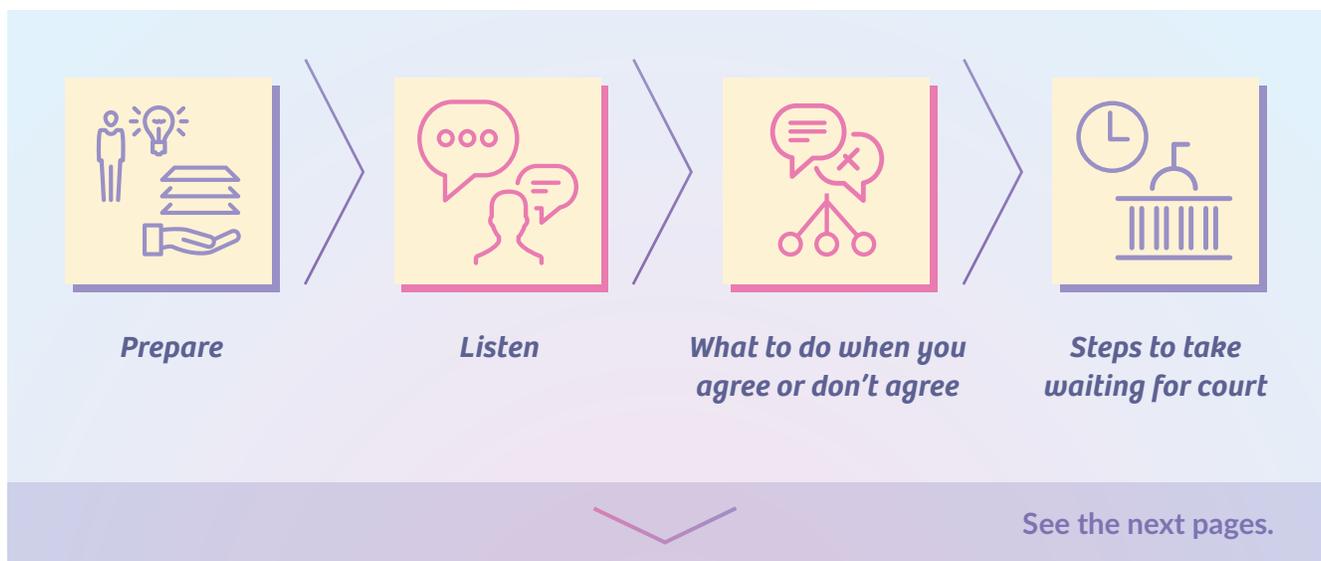
- If you need help with certain issues, meet with a mediator. They can work with you and your spouse together to set communication rules and boundaries. They can also help you put your agreement in writing, which increases certainty and reduces stress.
  - 👁️ See **Mediate BC's Family Roster** (list) to find a mediator. ([mediatebc.com/find-a-mediator/family-roster](https://mediatebc.com/find-a-mediator/family-roster))
  - 👁️ See the **MyLawBC Separation, divorce, & the law pathway**, and click Make a separation plan if you need help with decision making or a parenting plan. ([mylawbc.com/paths/family](https://mylawbc.com/paths/family))

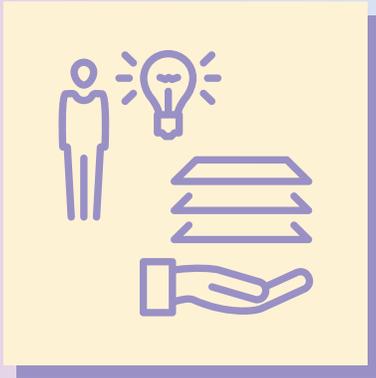
Emotional turmoil is natural and normal during separation. While you can't control how you feel, you can choose how you act. For example:

- If you know you feel angry or resentful, pause before you respond to a request from your spouse. For instance, wait 24 hours before you press send on your email reply.
- When you receive an angry email or text from your spouse, remember your spouse may also be experiencing similar emotions and stress. Choose to respond in a way that will help reduce the high emotion.
- You could also ask a trusted friend or advisor to help you come up with ways to stay calm and be reasonable.

## Negotiating tips

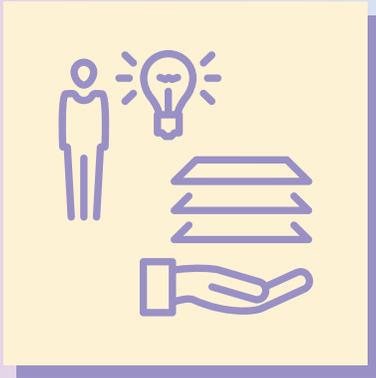
Consider these tips as you work on making an agreement with your spouse.





## Prepare to negotiate

- ✔ *Educate yourself* on the issue you're concerned about. That may be the public health recommendations during the pandemic, parenting plan suggestions for children at the same developmental stage as yours, or child support guideline amounts based on your incomes. You may want to get a lawyer's help to better understand your and the other parent's responsibilities. Make sure any proposal about your children is in their best interests and includes their wishes. Try to organize what you learn in a way to share with your spouse, if needed.
  - 👁 See the **Family Law in BC website** for child support guidelines. ([family.legalaid.bc.ca/finances-support/child-spousal-support/child-support](https://family.legalaid.bc.ca/finances-support/child-spousal-support/child-support))
  - 👁 See the **MyLawBC website** for best interests of the child. ([mylawbc.com/mediation/best-interest-of-child.php](https://mylawbc.com/mediation/best-interest-of-child.php))
- ✔ *Keep your emotions in check.* Don't get triggered. Remember the bigger picture: a workable, agreed-on outcome in the best interests of your children and reduced stress for your family. Be realistic and practical.
- ✔ *Reflect* on the most important issue to you at this time. Write down what you're most concerned about right now. Do the same with the other parent in mind. What are their priorities? The more you know about what concerns the other parent, or what's important to them, the more successful your negotiations will be. This approach can help you both find a solution. It's not easy to try to think about things from the other person's perspective – try to be open and curious.
- ✔ *Talk with a trusted friend or advisor* about your priorities – not someone who might doubt you or readily agree with you. You need someone who can step back a bit and you have confidence in.
- ✔ You may also want to *talk to a lawyer* about the issues, the law, your approach in negotiating, and your options if you aren't successful.
  - 👁 See the **Family Law in BC website** for where to get legal help. ([family.legalaid.bc.ca/bc-legal-system/legal-help/legal-advice-and-legal-aid](https://family.legalaid.bc.ca/bc-legal-system/legal-help/legal-advice-and-legal-aid))



- ✓ *Reach out* to connect with the other parent in a way that will be most helpful to get a solution. Pay attention to timing and how you communicate. Maybe the end of a long day isn't the best time to reach out. Think what may work best – by phone or maybe email or text. Plan carefully how you want to reach out. Use a friendly tone and don't discuss other issues. You may want to consider reaching out in two phases. In your first email or text say you'd like to work together to solve issues about transportation, for example, and you have some ideas you want to share. This will get the other parent's "buy in" to have the discussion. In your second email or text you can send your ideas for a solution. Or have an in-person meeting from a safe physical distance.

### *Prepare your proposal*

- ✓ *Write* your proposal as a working document. Share your research that might be helpful, such as websites.
- ✓ *Share* your proposal with the other parent, ask for their input, and set a timeline for response. If others need to agree with the plan, such as a grandparent, also share it with them.

### *Listen to the other parent*

- ✓ *Consider thoughtfully* when you hear from the other parent. Does their response address your concerns and priorities? Think about what may be the best and worst outcome, and what's in the middle. Also think about what could happen if you can't reach an agreement. You may find it helpful to think about BATNA (best alternative to a negotiated agreement). Look at all your alternatives if you can't reach an agreement, and think about your best options. Then try to do the same for the other parent. Also think about the bigger picture, including stress and time.
- ✓ *Respond* with what you agree on and make a counter offer on the things you don't agree on. Maybe a compromise might work.





### **When you agree with the other parent**

- ✔ Put your *agreement in writing* once you and the other parent agree on the issues. Think about building in a review and dispute resolution clause in case you later disagree about something. The agreement should say it's temporary and without prejudice until you can review it with a lawyer. If the agreement is specifically because of COVID-19 concerns and protocols, the agreement should state that clearly, and you may want it to say it's temporary.
- 👁 See the **Family Law in BC website** for the meaning of without prejudice. ([family.legalaid.bc.ca/bc-legal-system/if-you-have-go-court/trials-supreme-court/can-your-spouse-use-your-settlement-talks](https://family.legalaid.bc.ca/bc-legal-system/if-you-have-go-court/trials-supreme-court/can-your-spouse-use-your-settlement-talks))
- 👁 See the **MyLawBC website Resolution services** to help you and your spouse work on your agreement online using the Dialogue Tool. ([mylawbc.com/mylawbc.com/resolution-services](https://mylawbc.com/mylawbc.com/resolution-services))
- ✔ You may also want to *review your agreement* with a lawyer before you and the other parent sign it in front of a witness. Once signed, you and the other parent each get an original signed agreement.

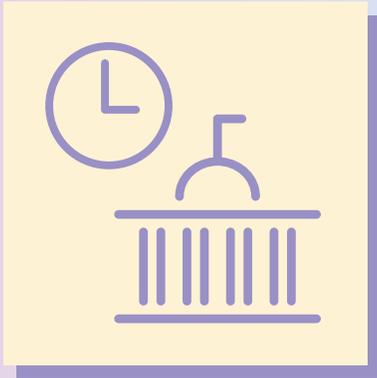


### **When you don't agree with the other parent**

- ✔ You may want to try *online or phone mediation* to reach an agreement. You may also want a lawyer's advice, or have a lawyer help you negotiate your agreement.
- 👁 See the **Mediate BC website** for the Quarantine Conflict Resolution Service. This low-fee or free online mediation service helps with pandemic-related issues, such as co-parenting and schooling, child and spousal support changes due to financial hardship, changes in parents' "bubbles," and safety concerns. After you fill out and submit the online form, staff contact you to assign a mediator. If you reach an agreement in mediation, the mediator can help document your understanding and may be able to prepare your agreement. ([mediatebc.com/resolving-other-disputes/quarantine](https://mediatebc.com/resolving-other-disputes/quarantine))



- 👁️ See the **MyLawBC website** for free online resolution services, including pathways that ask you questions about your family law issues and guide you to services, such as online parenting plan negotiations, mediation, and legal advice. ([mylawbc.com/mediation](https://mylawbc.com/mediation))
- ✔️ If you can't reach agreement and mediation hasn't worked, you may be able to use *arbitration* such as mediation-arbitration (Med-Arb).
  - 👁️ See the **Family Law in BC website** for more about arbitrators. ([family.legalaid.bc.ca/visit/arbitrators](https://family.legalaid.bc.ca/visit/arbitrators))
  - 👁️ See the **Mediate BC website** for Med-Arb. ([mediatebc.com/learn/what-is-med-arb](https://mediatebc.com/learn/what-is-med-arb))
- ✔️ If you have an existing court order or agreement, you could get help from a *parenting coordinator*.
  - 👁️ See the **Family Law in BC website** for parenting coordinators. ([family.legalaid.bc.ca/children/parenting-guardianship/parenting-coordinators](https://family.legalaid.bc.ca/children/parenting-guardianship/parenting-coordinators))
- ✔️ You could get help from a *collaborative lawyer* to negotiate an agreement and agrees not to go to court as part of the collaborative process.
  - 👁️ See the **BC Collaborative Roster Society website** for collaborative lawyers. ([bccollaborativerostersociety.com](https://bccollaborativerostersociety.com))
- ✔️ Go to *court*. You may be able to go to court depending on your matter and the situation of courts during the pandemic.

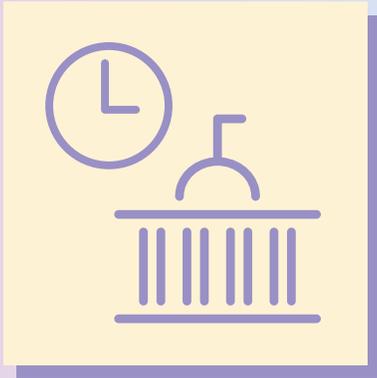


## *Waiting for court*

If you think you and your spouse can't work co-operatively to make an agreement for parenting in the best interests of your children, or if you can't agree on support, you may have to wait for a judge to make a decision for you. You may have to wait for a court date because of the pandemic. You need to find out whether you can go to court with your case and about court delays.

That can feel frustrating and scary. You can take these steps to help you feel more in control about your situation:

- Get legal advice about your options.
  - 👁 See the **Family Law in BC website** for where to get legal help. ([family.legallaid.bc.ca/bc-legal-system/legal-help](https://family.legallaid.bc.ca/bc-legal-system/legal-help))
- Watch a free online course about parenting after separation.
  - 👁 See the **BC government website** for the course for Indigenous families. ([parenting-after-separation-indigenous.jibc.ca](https://parenting-after-separation-indigenous.jibc.ca))
  - 👁 See the **BC government website** for the course for non-Indigenous families. ([gov.bc.ca/gov/content/life-events/divorce/family-justice/who-can-help/pas](https://gov.bc.ca/gov/content/life-events/divorce/family-justice/who-can-help/pas))
- Consider choosing a private mediator from Mediate BC's Family Roster to help with any separation issues, including financial. They set their own rates, and some offer low or pro bono (free) rates to families with low incomes.
  - 👁 See **Mediate BC's Family Roster** to find a mediator. ([mediatebc.com/find-a-mediator/family-roster](https://mediatebc.com/find-a-mediator/family-roster))
- Use the MyLawBC resolution services to help with your parenting and separation issues. The other parent may then decide to cooperate and you can work out a plan.
  - 👁 See the **MyLawBC website** for resolution services. ([mylawbc.com/resolution-services](https://mylawbc.com/resolution-services))



- Consider other options in addition to mediation, or arbitration if you have a lawyer. A lawyer may also be able to help you negotiate an agreement.
  - See the **Family Law in BC website** for who can help you reach an agreement. ([family.legalaid.bc.ca/bc-legal-system/legal-forms-documents/agreements/who-can-help-you-reach-agreement](https://family.legalaid.bc.ca/bc-legal-system/legal-forms-documents/agreements/who-can-help-you-reach-agreement))
  - See the **Family Law in BC website** for more about arbitrators. ([family.legalaid.bc.ca/visit/arbitrators](https://family.legalaid.bc.ca/visit/arbitrators))
- Think about your children and how their voices can be heard in the process.
  - See the **MyLawBC website** for best interests of the child. ([mylawbc.com/mediation/best-interest-of-child.php](https://mylawbc.com/mediation/best-interest-of-child.php))
- If you're making a new application, decide which court to apply to.
  - See the **Family Law in BC website** for information about the legal system. ([family.legalaid.bc.ca/bc-legal-system/if-you-have-go-court](https://family.legalaid.bc.ca/bc-legal-system/if-you-have-go-court))
- Check the court process for making an application during the pandemic.
  - See the **Family Law in BC website** for more information. ([family.legalaid.bc.ca/bc-legal-system/covid-19-updates-bc-legal-system](https://family.legalaid.bc.ca/bc-legal-system/covid-19-updates-bc-legal-system))
- Learn what the law says about the topics affecting you, such as best interests of the child, parental responsibilities, parenting time, and contact with a child.
  - See the **Family Law in BC website** for more information. ([family.legalaid.bc.ca/children/parenting-guardianship](https://family.legalaid.bc.ca/children/parenting-guardianship))



## Life after separation

After your separation, you'll be creating a new normal for yourself.

You may make new friends, move to a different neighbourhood, and experience changes in your finances. These changes are opportunities to build your self-confidence and move forward.

Your life can be richer and more fulfilling than before you separated. You can choose how you want to live, your goals, and your dreams.

### *Looking ahead*

You'll need time to adjust to the many changes. But if you can look forward, you won't get caught up in the negative parts of the past, including your separation.

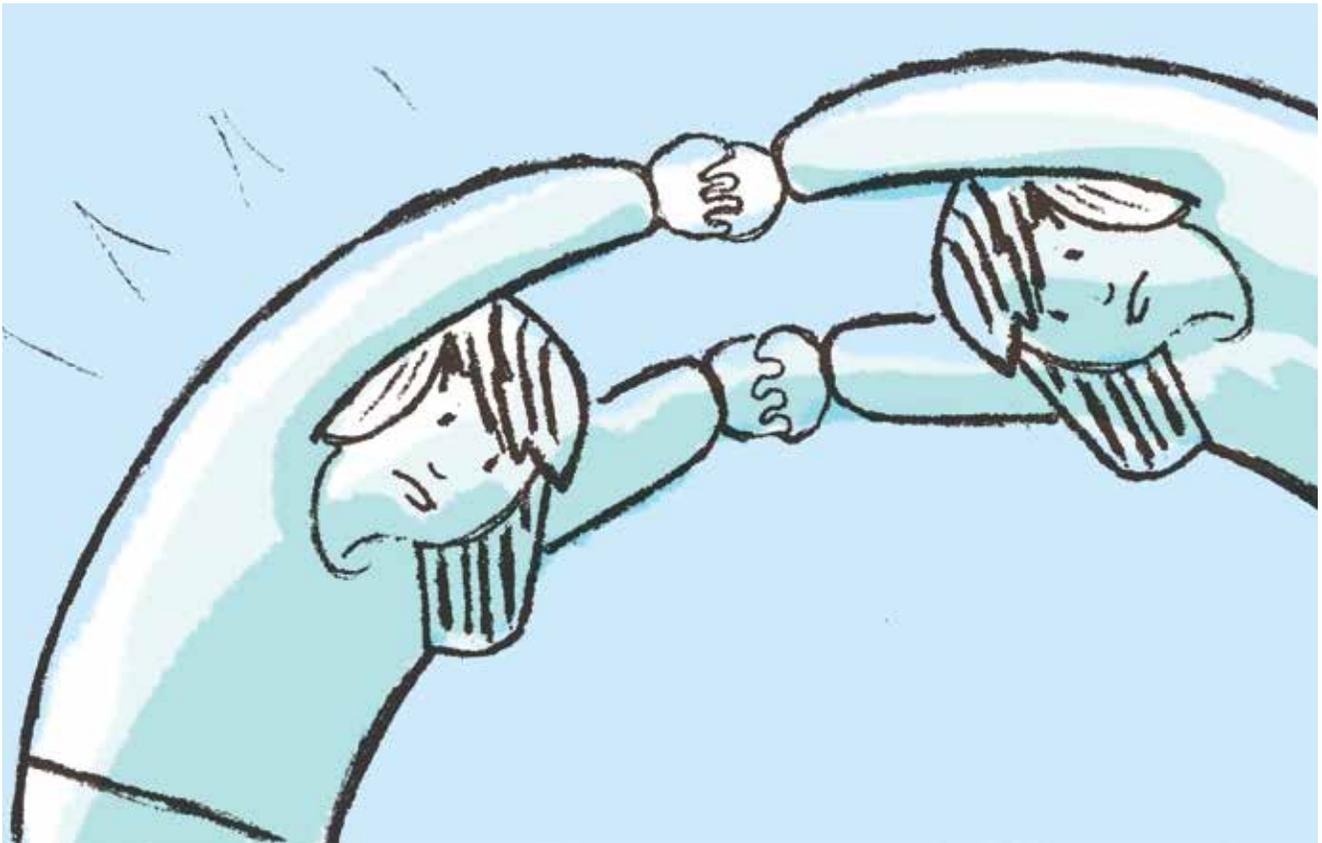
- Focus on your future.
- See your situation as an opportunity to make positive changes for yourself.
- Recognize your strengths, passions, hobbies, and career goals.
- Make a plan and set goals for personal growth.
- Develop new routines to help you through the transition to life after separation.
- Keep active and have a regular schedule to stay motivated.
- Participate in activities to meet new people. Get a sense of belonging with new groups through your community, neighbourhood, or church.
- Find new ways to get involved and connect with your community, such as joining a political party or cause.
- Acknowledge the pandemic's challenges, including physical distancing.
- Mark milestones, such as one year since your separation, and recognize and celebrate them to help you on your way.

## Getting support

After you've completed your separation or divorce, you may want to continue getting support. Community resources offer seminars and support groups for people who've gone through divorce and want to learn about building healthy relationships.

👁 See *Emotional help* on **page 34**.

Remember —  
your situation  
will get better.



# Where to get help



## Legal Aid BC websites

- **MyLawBC** gives you an action plan for your legal issue. Choose a pathway, answer questions, and get the help you need. ([mylawbc.com](http://mylawbc.com))
  - » **Resolution services**  
(online negotiation/mediation options)
  - » **Make a separation plan** pathway
  - » **Get family orders** pathway
  - » **Served with court documents** pathway
  - » **All About Mediation** infographic
  - » **How can we resolve our family law issues?** infographic
- **Aboriginal Legal Aid in BC** has information for Indigenous families. ([aboriginal.legalaid.bc.ca](http://aboriginal.legalaid.bc.ca))
  - » **Your family and the law**
  - » **Child protection**
  - » **Abuse and family violence**
  - » **Court orders and hearings**
  - » **Delegated Aboriginal agencies**
  - » **Mediation**
  - » **Extended Family Program**
  - » **Parents Legal Centres**
  - » **Legal system under COVID-19**
  - » **Your legal questions answered**
- **Family Law in BC** has self-help information about family matters and includes a live chat option to help you. ([family.legalaid.bc.ca](http://family.legalaid.bc.ca))
  - » **Separation & Divorce**
  - » **Children**
  - » **Finances & Support**
  - » **Abuse & Family Violence**
  - » **BC Legal System**
  - » **Immigration**
  - » **Legal system under COVID-19**
  - » **COVID-19 and the law: your questions answered**



👁 Check with organizations about their services during COVID-19.

## Help for you and your spouse

### Help in a crisis

- **BC211** is a free, confidential information and referral service in Greater Vancouver, the Fraser Valley, Squamish-Lillooet, and the Sunshine Coast Regional District. Phone **211** or text **211**, 24 hours every day, online chat across BC, 8:00 am to 11:00 pm, every day. ([bc211.ca](https://bc211.ca))
- **BC Association of Aboriginal Centres** offers culturally safe programs and services, including Crisis Lines & Support Resources and COVID-19 Support Resources. ([bcaafc.com](https://bcaafc.com))
- **First Nations and Inuit Hope for Wellness Helpline** provides free, experienced, and culturally competent help. Phone **1-855-242-3310**, 24 hours every day. ([www.hopeforwellness.ca](https://www.hopeforwellness.ca))
- **HealthLinkBC** can connect you with mental **health services** in your community. Phone **811**. ([healthlinkbc.ca](https://healthlinkbc.ca))
- **Kids Help Phone** provides free, confidential support for young people and adults in English and French. Phone **1-800-668-6868** or text **686868**, 24 hours every day. ([kidshelpphone.ca](https://kidshelpphone.ca))
- **KUU-US Crisis Line Society** has a crisis line for Indigenous adults and Elders. Phone **250-723-4050** or **1-800-588-8717**, 24 hours every day. ([kuu-uscrisisline.com](https://kuu-uscrisisline.com))
- **Seniors Abuse and Information Line** (SAIL) is a BC-wide, free, confidential support line for older adults and those who care about them. Phone **604-437-1940** or **1-866-437-1940**, 8:00 am to 8:00 pm, every day except holidays. ([seniorsfirstbc.ca/programs/sail](https://seniorsfirstbc.ca/programs/sail))
- **VictimLinkBC** helps survivors of family violence. Phone **1-800-563-0808**, 24 hours every day. ([victimlinkbc.ca](https://victimlinkbc.ca))

## Emotional help

Many workplaces cover counselling services through extended medical benefits. Sometimes they may be free for a certain number of visits. Even if you go only for the free sessions, that's still very helpful.

- **BC Association of Clinical Counsellors** can help you find a registered clinical counsellor in your area. ([bc-counsellors.org](http://bc-counsellors.org))
- **BC Association of Social Workers** has a list of registered social workers in private practice who provide mental health services. ([bcasw.org](http://bcasw.org))
- **BC Ministry of Attorney General – Family Justice Services Division** has staff available to provide support and assistance in identifying appropriate community services. ([gov.bc.ca/family-justice-services-division](http://gov.bc.ca/family-justice-services-division))
- **Canadian Mental Health Association** has information for help and support in BC during COVID-19, including a **crisis line**. Phone **310-6789**, 24 hours every day. ([cmha.bc.ca](http://cmha.bc.ca)) ([crisislines.bc.ca/services](http://crisislines.bc.ca/services))
- Many churches provide group supports for people going through a separation or divorce.
- Many community organizations offer reduced-rate counselling and family counselling (and other supports). Some examples from the major centres in BC:
  - » **Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies** (directory of support programs for women across BC) ([caefs.ca/our-locals](http://caefs.ca/our-locals))
  - » **Family Services of Greater Vancouver** (Greater Vancouver) ([fsgv.ca](http://fsgv.ca))
  - » **Family Services of Greater Victoria** (Greater Victoria) ([fsgv.org](http://fsgv.org))
  - » **Interior Community Services** (Kamloops and Interior region) ([interiorcommunityservices.bc.ca](http://interiorcommunityservices.bc.ca))
  - » **KCR Community Resources** (Central Okanagan) ([kcr.ca](http://kcr.ca))
  - » **Nelson Community Services** (NCS) (Nelson and surrounding area) ([servicesfyi.ca](http://servicesfyi.ca))
  - » **Pacific Centre Family Services Association** (south Vancouver Island) ([pacificcentrefamilyservices.org](http://pacificcentrefamilyservices.org))
  - » **Sources Community Resources Centres** (across BC) ([sourcesbc.ca](http://sourcesbc.ca))
  - » **Terrace and District Community Service Society** (TDCSS) (Northwest BC) ([tdcss.ca](http://tdcss.ca))



- **PovNet** has a list of health supports and advocates across BC. ([povnet.org](http://povnet.org))
- These organizations provide cultural and other support programs:
  - » **Chimo Community Services** ([chimoservices.com](http://chimoservices.com))
  - » **MOSAIC** ([mosaicbc.org](http://mosaicbc.org))
  - » **North Shore Multicultural Society** ([nsms.ca](http://nsms.ca))
  - » **S.U.C.C.E.S.S.** ([successbc.ca](http://successbc.ca))

### **Legal help**

- **BC Ministry of Attorney General – Family Justice Services Division** has staff throughout BC specially trained to help families resolve their issues about guardianship, parenting arrangements, contact, and support. All services are free, including mediation by accredited family mediators. ([gov.bc.ca/family-justice-services-division](http://gov.bc.ca/family-justice-services-division))
- **Clicklaw** has links to legal information, education, and help for British Columbians to find out about options to solve legal problems and phone numbers for legal help. ([clicklaw.bc.ca](http://clicklaw.bc.ca))
- **Legal Aid BC** explains how to apply for legal aid, about other free legal advice services, and where to get help with your legal issue. ([legalaid.bc.ca](http://legalaid.bc.ca))
- **Mediate BC** has a directory of mediators who help with family-related matters, and gives mediation rates and information about the Quarantine Conflict Resolution Service. ([mediatebc.com](http://mediatebc.com))

## Help for you and the other parent

### Help with parenting

- **BC Hear the Child Society** has a roster of specially trained people to interview children and take their wishes to decision-making processes, including mediation and court. ([hearthechild.ca](http://hearthechild.ca))
- **Families Change** has guides to separation and divorce for parents, children, and teens. ([familieschange.ca](http://familieschange.ca))
- **Government of Canada Department of Justice** has a guide to parenting arrangements after parents separate or divorce that explains how children react at different stages and ages. ([justice.gc.ca/eng/fl-df/parent/mp-fdp/p8.html](http://justice.gc.ca/eng/fl-df/parent/mp-fdp/p8.html))
- **Parenting After Separation** is a free online course for BC parents to get tools to work together after they separate and put their families first. ([gov.bc.ca/gov/content/life-events/divorce/family-justice/who-can-help/pas](http://gov.bc.ca/gov/content/life-events/divorce/family-justice/who-can-help/pas)).
- **Parenting After Separation for Indigenous Families** is a free online course for Indigenous parents, guardians, and other family members with separation or divorce issues. ([parenting-after-separation-indigenous.jibc.ca](http://parenting-after-separation-indigenous.jibc.ca))



## Help for your children

### Help in a crisis

- **BC211** is a free, confidential information and referral service, including for youth, in Greater Vancouver, the Fraser Valley, Squamish-Lillooet, and the Sunshine Coast Regional District. Phone **211** or text **211**, 24 hours every day, online chat across BC, 8:00 am to 11:00 pm, every day. ([bc211.ca](http://bc211.ca))
- **Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies** (across BC) has a directory of support programs for children who witness abuse. ([caefs.ca/our-locals](http://caefs.ca/our-locals))
- **Family Services of Greater Vancouver** (Vancouver) has a counselling service for children and youth. ([fsgv.ca](http://fsgv.ca))
- **Family Services of Greater Victoria** (Victoria) has a counselling service for children and youth. ([fsgv.org](http://fsgv.org))
- **Families Change** has materials for children and teens, including an interactive game, to help them understand the changes happening in their family. ([familieschange.ca](http://familieschange.ca))
- **Here2Talk** provides access to free, confidential counselling and community referral services to students registered in BC post-secondary institutions. Phone **604-642-5212** or **1-877-857-3397**, 24 hours every day. ([here2talk.ca](http://here2talk.ca))
- **Kids Help Phone** provides free, confidential support for young people in English and French, including a COVID-19 info centre. Phone **1-800-668-6868** or text **686868**, 24 hours every day. ([kidshelpphone.ca](http://kidshelpphone.ca))
- **KUU-US Crisis Line Society** has a crisis line for Indigenous children and youth. Phone **250-723-2040** or **1-800-588-8717**, 24 hours every day. ([kuu-uscrisisline.com](http://kuu-uscrisisline.com))
- **Society for Children and Youth of BC** offers a variety of programs to support the well-being of children and youth in BC, including legal help (during COVID-19 by appointment). Phone **778-657-5544** or **1-877-462-0037**. ([scyofbc.org](http://scyofbc.org))
- **Youth in BC** has crisis lines and online support. ([youthinbc.com](http://youthinbc.com))

## Communication help

### With your spouse

- **Government of Canada Department of Justice** has a guide to email etiquette for separating and divorcing parents. ([justice.gc.ca/eng/fl-df/parent/mp-fdp/p9.html](http://justice.gc.ca/eng/fl-df/parent/mp-fdp/p9.html))



# MY LAWBC.com

Helps you understand the laws about separation and divorce

Answer questions about your situation. Learn about the law as you go.

## Get help specific to your situation



We made a **parenting plan**.



We worked with a **free online mediator**.



I made a **safety plan** for me and my children.



I got a **court order** for child support.

## Find **your** solution

 **MY LAWBC.com**  
#MyProblemMySolution

 **Legal Aid BC**



We negotiated a **separation agreement**.

## How to get free Legal Aid BC publications

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(under Quick Links, click BC Public Legal Education & Information)

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