



THE PARENT SEPARATION STARTER KIT

Practical guidance for supporting your child
before and after separation

SAMUEL LAWSON FOUNDATION | REVISED OCTOBER 2026

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Use this guide at your own pace. Start with the safety note, then turn to the chapter that speaks to what your family needs today. You can write on the practical worksheets at the end.

This guide supports parents and caregivers. It is not a complete guide to divorce, property, maintenance proceedings or litigation.

Before you begin

Safety comes first

If there is abuse, coercive control, stalking, threats, substance-related impairment or a concern about a child's safety, seek individual professional advice before arranging conversations, mediation, visits or handovers. Cooperation is not a reason to ignore risk or breach a protection order. Contact with both parents is not appropriate at any cost.

You do not have to tell your child about separation together, meet the other parent in person or attend events together if doing so is unsafe. Communication through an agreed safe channel, a professional or separate parenting arrangements may be more appropriate.

If you or your child is in immediate danger, contact emergency services or the police. Do not delay urgent help to finish this guide or submit a referral. If a child discloses harm, listen calmly, take them seriously and seek safeguarding advice. Do not repeatedly question them or ask them to prove what happened.

How to use the advice

The suggestions in this kit must be adapted to your child's age, development, communication needs and family circumstances. Some children feel sadness, anger or uncertainty; others feel relief when conflict reduces. There is no single correct reaction.

Professional guidance and existing orders

This kit provides general information and practical parenting guidance. It does not replace legal advice, assessment, psychological care or safeguarding intervention. Follow applicable court and protection orders and obtain advice about proposed changes. Nothing in this guide authorises a change to an order.

Our vision

A world where children feel safe, seen, and free to form healthy family connections.

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Welcome

If you're reading this, life probably doesn't look the way you imagined it would. Perhaps you've already decided your relationship is over. Perhaps you're lying awake at night wondering whether it should be. Perhaps you've been told your spouse wants a divorce and your world has been turned upside down. Or perhaps you've been living in conflict for so long that separation feels like the only option left.

Whatever brought you here, we want you to know one thing before you read another page. You are not alone. Every year, thousands of South African children experience the separation of their parents. Behind every court file, parenting plan and divorce order is a child trying to make sense of a world that suddenly feels uncertain.

As adults, we often become consumed by the practical realities of separation. Who will stay in the house? How will we afford two homes? What happens to the children? How will holidays work? Will we have to go to court?

Those questions matter. But while you are worrying about the future, your child is asking very different questions.

"Did I cause this?" "Will Daddy still tuck me into bed?" "If I laugh with Mommy, will Daddy be sad?" "Where will my teddy sleep?" "Will we ever be a family again?"

Children usually experience separation through changes in everyday life: routines, time with a parent, familiar places and the atmosphere at home. Some feel worried or sad; others feel relieved when conflict reduces. Try to understand your child's experience without assuming it is the same as yours.

Sometimes they lose not only a home, but also daily contact with a parent, grandparents, cousins, pets or neighbourhood friends.

For many children, divorce is not a single event. It is a series of changes, each requiring them to adjust again and again. The way adults respond during this time has an enormous influence on how children carry these experiences into adulthood.

That doesn't mean you have to be a perfect parent. There is no such thing. You will make mistakes. You will lose your patience. You will have days when grief, anger or exhaustion gets the better of you.

What your child needs is not perfection. They need at least one adult who keeps choosing them, even when everything else feels uncertain.

This guide has not been written to tell you whether you should stay or leave your relationship. Only you can make that decision. It has not been written to provide legal advice. Every family is different, and every case deserves individual guidance.

Instead, this guide has been written with one purpose: to help you understand what this experience may feel like for your child, and to equip you with practical, realistic ways to protect their emotional wellbeing while your family navigates change.

As a Foundation, we support children and families facing difficult circumstances. This guide reflects our commitment to keeping children's wellbeing at the centre of family support.

Warmth, predictable care and protection from adult conflict can help children adjust, although some children also need specialist support.

Children can adapt to family changes when they receive sensitive care, dependable support and protection from harm. Resilience is not a reason to dismiss distress or expect a child to cope alone.

Because although your relationship may be ending, your child's childhood is still unfolding. The choices you make today will become part of the story they tell about their childhood tomorrow. Let's make that story one of love, safety and hope.

Before You Read On

As you work through this guide, we invite you to pause from time to time and reflect.

Ask yourself:

If my child were writing a diary today, what would they say they are most worried about? Have I asked my child how they are feeling, or have I assumed I already know? Is there anything happening between the adults that my child is carrying silently? If my child read this guide in twenty years' time, what would I hope they remember about how I handled this season?

There are no perfect answers. Only opportunities to do better tomorrow than we did yesterday.

Chapter 1

Before you tell your child

One of the hardest conversations you will ever have as a parent is telling your child that you are separating. You may have rehearsed the words in your head a hundred times. You may be worried that you'll say the wrong thing, that your child will cry, become angry or ask questions you can't answer.

The truth is, there is no perfect way to have this conversation. There is, however, a way to have it with honesty, kindness and your child's wellbeing at the centre. Your child may not remember every word you say, but they will remember how you made them feel.

This chapter will help you prepare for that conversation.

Tell Your Child. Don't Let Them Find Out.

Many parents delay telling their children because they want to protect them. Others avoid the conversation because they are still trying to process the separation themselves.

While these feelings are understandable, children should not discover that their parents have separated because one parent suddenly moves out, a removal truck arrives, or they overhear adults talking.

Children are incredibly observant. They notice tension long before adults realise they do. They notice whispered conversations, separate bedrooms, tears, arguments, and changes in routine.

When children know something is wrong but nobody explains it, they often create their own explanations. Sadly, many children believe they are the reason. Some think they were too naughty. Some think their parents would stay together if they behaved better. Some become anxious because they don't know what is happening next.

Children deserve better than uncertainty. They deserve an honest explanation, given with love and reassurance.

The Treehouse tip

Give your child clear, age-appropriate information when it is safe to do so. Honest reassurance can reduce uncertainty. Avoid assumptions about how they should react.

Make Sure You're Ready

Before you sit down with your child, ask yourself one question: Am I ready to have this conversation for my child's benefit, or because I need to explain myself?

There is a difference. This conversation is not about convincing your child that you have made the right decision. It is not about explaining who is to blame. It is not about sharing details of your relationship. It is about helping your child feel safe.

If your emotions are overwhelming and there is time to prepare safely, ask a trusted adult or professional to help you plan the conversation. Do not postpone urgent safety action. You do not need to hide all sadness; give your child reassurance and avoid making them responsible for your feelings.

Choose the Right Time

If possible, choose a quiet time when neither you nor your child needs to rush anywhere.

Avoid telling your child:

- Just before school
- Just before bedtime
- Before an exam or important event
- During an argument
- On birthdays, holidays or other special occasions

After the conversation, try to spend some time together. Read a story. Go for a walk. Play a game. Watch a movie. Your child needs to know that although something important has changed, they have not lost you.

Tell Them Together If You Can

Where it is safe and appropriate, it is usually best for both parents to tell the children together. This sends an important message: although your relationship as partners is ending, your relationship as parents continues. Children should hear one clear message from both parents.

If a joint conversation is unsafe, one safe caregiver can speak to the child. Avoid insults or adult accusations, but do not conceal essential safety information. Explain boundaries simply, for example: 'The adults are arranging safe ways for us to manage things. You did not cause this, and you can tell me if anything worries you.'

Keep It Age Appropriate

Children deserve honesty. They do not need adult details. There is a big difference. Your explanation should match your child's age and level of understanding.

Younger children: Use short, concrete explanations, such as: 'We are going to live in different homes. You did not cause this. I love you and will keep caring for you.' Describe the arrangements you know. Speak for the other parent only where you can do so honestly.

Primary school children: Children of this age often ask practical questions: Where will I live? Will I still see Daddy? Who will fetch me from school? Will I still have my own room? Answer what you know. If you don't know something yet, be honest: "We're still working that out, but we promise we'll tell you as soon as we know."

Teenagers: Teenagers often understand more about relationships and may ask difficult questions. Be truthful, but don't burden them with adult problems. They do not need to know about affairs, finances or every disagreement that led to the separation. Remember, they are your child, not your counsellor.

The Treehouse tip

Age-appropriate honesty is not the same as telling your child everything. Children need information that helps them feel safe, not information that makes them carry adult burdens.

Four reassuring messages your child can hear

Adapt these messages to the facts of your family. Reassurance must be honest; do not promise cooperation, contact or behaviour you cannot control.

- This is not your fault. Nothing you did caused the separation.
- You are loved and cared for. I will keep caring for you.
- The adults are responsible for the arrangements. We will explain what happens next.
- You do not have to choose sides. You can share your feelings and tell a trusted adult if anything worries you.

Don't Make Promises You Can't Keep

One of the hardest moments is when a child asks: "Will you ever get back together?"

Avoid giving false hope or predicting how the other parent will behave. You might say: 'I understand that you wish we could live together again. We are going to live separately. This is not your fault. I will keep caring for you, and we will tell you about arrangements when they are clear.' If the decision is not final, say so honestly.

Your child deserves honesty delivered with compassion.

Remember That This Is Not One Conversation

Many parents feel pressure to get everything right. The truth is, this conversation will continue over time. As children grow, they understand relationships differently. They will ask new questions. They will revisit old feelings.

Be patient. Keep answering. Keep reassuring.

Sometimes your child needs to hear the same words ten times before they truly believe them.

Before You Leave This Chapter

Have we planned what we are going to say? Is our explanation appropriate for our child's age? Have we avoided blame? Can we answer the most important questions about what happens next? Have we made time to stay with our child after the conversation? Have we remembered that our child's greatest need is to feel safe and loved?

Key takeaway

Your child does not need perfect parents. They need parents who are willing to put their child's needs ahead of their own hurt, at least for one conversation. You cannot take away the sadness your child may feel. But with honesty, reassurance and love, you can give them something just as important: the confidence that, although life is changing, they will never face those changes alone.

The first few weeks: helping your child adjust

The conversation is over. Perhaps it went better than you expected. Perhaps it was far more difficult. Maybe your child cried, became angry or quietly walked away. Or perhaps they surprised you by asking if they could go back to playing.

Whatever happened, one thing is certain: the conversation was not the end of this journey. It was the beginning.

Many parents expect the days after separation to become easier once everyone knows what is happening. In reality, this is often when children begin to process what they have heard. The initial shock starts to wear off and the reality of living in two homes, seeing one parent less often, or adjusting to new routines begins to sink in.

This is the stage where children need their parents more than ever. Not because they need all the answers, but because they need consistency, reassurance and the quiet confidence that, although life has changed, they are still safe.

Children Grieve Differently to Adults

As adults, we often think about divorce in terms of the relationship that has ended. Children experience it very differently. They are not grieving the marriage. They are grieving the life they knew.

They may miss having breakfast with both parents. They may miss hearing one parent come home from work each evening. They may worry about where the family dog will live or whether Christmas will ever feel the same again.

Some children struggle with the big changes. Others become upset over things that seem small to us, like leaving a favourite toy behind at the other house or forgetting which school uniform is packed where.

Try to remember that these moments are rarely just about the forgotten toy or the missing jersey. Often, they are the first visible signs that your child is carrying much bigger emotions.

When your child reacts strongly to something that seems insignificant, pause before correcting them. Instead of asking, "Why are you making such a fuss?", ask yourself, "What might my child really be feeling right now?" Sometimes what children need most is not a solution. They need someone to understand.

The Comfort of Ordinary Days

One of the greatest gifts you can give your child during this season is routine. Children find security in knowing what comes next. While you may not be able to stop life from changing, you can protect the small, familiar moments that help your child feel grounded.

If bedtime stories were part of your family's routine before the separation, keep reading them. If Friday nights were pizza nights or Saturday mornings meant sport, try to continue those

traditions where possible.

These routines may seem ordinary to you, but to your child they are reminders that not everything has changed. Children do not need every day to be exciting. They need it to feel predictable.

The Treehouse tip

Children feel safest when at least one part of their day remains familiar. Don't underestimate the comfort that comes from ordinary routines.

You Don't Have to Make Every Moment Perfect

Many parents carry enormous guilt after separation. They worry that every visit needs to be exciting, that they must buy more gifts, plan bigger outings or make up for lost time.

The truth is, children are not measuring your love by how much money you spend on them. They measure it by your presence. They remember bedtime cuddles, kicking a ball in the garden, baking together, reading stories and talking about their day.

The greatest gift you can give your child is your attention. When you are with them, be with them. Put your phone away. Listen to their stories, even if they seem unimportant. Ask questions. Laugh together. Children spell love with time.

Your Child Needs Permission to Love Both Parents

One of the most difficult positions a child can find themselves in is feeling that they must choose between the people they love most. Many children become experts at protecting their parents' feelings.

They stop talking about the fun they had at Dad's because they think it might upset Mom. They hide excitement about seeing Mom because they don't want Dad to feel lonely. No child should carry that burden.

Where it is safe and appropriate, encourage your child to enjoy their time with the other parent. If they come home excited about something they did together, share in their excitement. Your child is not choosing one parent over the other. They are simply being a child who loves both.

Giving them permission to love freely is one of the greatest acts of kindness you can offer.

Expect the Questions to Keep Coming

Many parents think the difficult questions will all come on the day they tell their child about the separation. Often, they don't. Children process information slowly.

A question may come while you're driving to school, walking through a supermarket or reading a bedtime story. They may ask the same question several times, not because they have forgotten your answer, but because they are checking whether it has changed.

Be patient. Children find comfort in consistency. If your answer remains calm, loving and reassuring each time, it slowly becomes something they can rely on.

Watch for Changes, Not Just Words

Not every child will tell you they are struggling. Some children simply don't have the words. Instead, they communicate through their behaviour.

A normally confident child may suddenly become clingy. A child who sleeps well may begin waking during the night. A teenager may spend more time alone than usual.

Changes in sleep, behaviour, concentration or friendships can be signs that a child needs support. They do not establish a diagnosis, and they should not automatically be attributed to separation. Notice patterns and ask gently how your child is doing. Seek professional advice if changes persist, worsen or interfere with everyday life.

Take Care of Yourself Too

Children are deeply affected by the emotional wellbeing of the adults caring for them. This doesn't mean you have to hide your sadness. It is healthy for children to see that adults have feelings.

What matters is helping them understand that your emotions are not their responsibility. It is okay for your child to see you cry. It is not okay for them to feel they have to comfort you.

Lean on trusted friends, family members, your faith community or a professional counsellor. Allow your child to remain what they are meant to be. A child.

Every Family Finds a New Normal

There will be days when everything feels overwhelming. There will be moments when you question every decision you've made. There will also be moments when you realise your child laughed without hesitation, settled into a new routine or spoke happily about both homes.

Healing rarely happens all at once. It happens through hundreds of small moments of safety, consistency and love. Give yourself permission to learn as you go. You do not need to have all the answers. You simply need to keep showing up.

Before You Leave This Chapter

What routines can you protect over the next few weeks to help your child feel secure? Have you made time to simply enjoy your child, without talking about the separation? Is there anything your child may be trying to communicate through their behaviour rather than their words? If your child could describe how these first few weeks have felt, what do you hope they would say?

Key takeaway

Children do not expect their parents to have all the answers after a separation. What they need is something far simpler: a parent who keeps showing up, a parent who keeps listening, a parent who reminds them, through both words and actions, that although life looks different, they are still deeply loved, they are still safe, and they never have to face this journey alone.

Chapter 3

Five mistakes even loving parents make

No parent gets everything right. If you've read the first two chapters, you are already doing something important: taking the time to understand what your child needs during one of the biggest transitions of their life.

That doesn't mean you won't make mistakes. You will. Every parent does. Divorce and separation are emotionally exhausting. You're trying to make legal decisions, manage finances, adjust to new routines and process your own grief, all while continuing to parent. It's no wonder that sometimes the lines become blurred.

This chapter isn't about making you feel guilty. It's about helping you recognise some of the common mistakes parents make so that, when possible, you can choose a different path.

Mistake 1: Asking Your Child to Choose Sides

Most parents would never intentionally ask a child to choose between them. Yet it often happens in subtle ways: "Would you rather stay with Mommy or Daddy?" "Who do you want to spend Christmas with?" "Tell me honestly, whose house do you like better?"

Even when asked gently, these questions place children in an impossible position. Your child loves both of you. Choosing one parent can feel like rejecting the other.

Reassure your child that they are not responsible for solving adult disagreements or choosing sides. Invite their views without pressure. Their views deserve consideration in light of their age, maturity and development; adults and, where necessary, the court remain responsible for decisions and safety.

Mistake 2: Speaking Negatively About the Other Parent

When relationships end painfully, it can be incredibly difficult to speak kindly about the other parent. But remember, your child sees themselves in both of you.

When a child repeatedly hears that one parent is "selfish," "lazy" or "a terrible person," they may begin to wonder whether part of them is those things too.

This doesn't mean you must pretend everything is perfect. It simply means protecting your child from adult conflict wherever possible. There is a difference between being honest and placing your child in the middle. If you cannot say something positive, it is often better to say very little.

The Treehouse tip

Ask yourself this question before speaking: "Is what I'm about to say helping my child, or helping me?" If the answer is "helping me," it may be a conversation to have with another adult instead.

Mistake 3: Turning Your Child into the Messenger

Children should never be responsible for communication between parents. Instead of saying "Tell your dad he must bring your school shoes back" or "Ask your mom what time she's collecting you," communicate directly with the other parent whenever possible.

Being caught in the middle places unnecessary pressure on children and can make them anxious about getting things wrong. Let your child enjoy being a child. Leave the administration to the adults.

Mistake 4: Expecting Your Child to Meet Your Emotional Needs

Separation can be lonely. You may miss having someone to talk to. You may feel hurt, angry or frightened about the future. Those feelings are normal.

What is not healthy is expecting your child to become your source of emotional support. Statements such as "I don't know what I'd do without you," "You're the only person I can talk to," or "You need to look after Mommy now," may sound loving, but they place an emotional responsibility on a child that they are not equipped to carry.

Your child needs to know that the adults in their life are capable of caring for them. They should never feel responsible for caring for the adults. Lean on friends, family members, your faith community or a professional if you need support. Allow your child to remain exactly what they are meant to be. A child.

Mistake 5: Forgetting That Your Child Is Watching

Children learn far more from what we do than from what we say. They notice how you greet the other parent at handover. They notice whether you roll your eyes when their name is mentioned. They notice whether you celebrate their excitement after spending time with the other parent.

Every interaction teaches your child something about relationships, conflict and respect. You don't have to be best friends with your former partner. You don't even have to like each other. But when your child sees two adults behaving respectfully, even during difficult circumstances, they learn that conflict does not have to destroy kindness. That lesson will stay with them long after childhood.

Progress, Not Perfection

You may have recognised yourself somewhere in this chapter. If you did, don't be discouraged. Awareness is the first step towards change.

Your child doesn't need you to be perfect. They need to see you trying. Sometimes the most powerful words a parent can say are: "I'm sorry." "I shouldn't have said that." "I'll do better next time."

Those moments teach children something incredibly valuable: mistakes don't define us. Taking responsibility does.

What I Hope You Remember

Your child has lost the relationship between their parents. Don't let them lose the freedom to love both of you.

Every decision you make has the potential either to place your child in the middle of the conflict or to gently guide them out of it. Whenever you're unsure what to do, ask yourself one simple question: "Will this make life easier or harder for my child?" More often than not, the answer will show you the way forward.

Chapter 4

Parenting together when you are no longer partners

One of the biggest adjustments after separation is accepting that although your relationship as partners has ended, your relationship as parents has not. You may no longer share a home, celebrate anniversaries or make decisions as a couple, but if you have children together, you will continue sharing one of the most important roles of your lives: raising them.

For many parents, this can feel impossible in the beginning. You may still be hurt, angry or disappointed. There may have been a betrayal, years of conflict or simply the painful realisation that your relationship could not be repaired. Those feelings are real, and they deserve to be acknowledged.

At the same time, your child should not have to carry the consequences of adult conflict. One of the greatest gifts you can give your child is the confidence that, although your relationship with each other has changed, your commitment to them has not.

Children may move between homes with different routines. Aim for dependable care and clear expectations in each setting, with consistency where it is possible and safe. A child can feel supported without the adults being close or agreeing on every detail.

Your Child Has the Right to Love Both Parents

Children are not disloyal because they enjoy spending time with the other parent. When your child comes home excited about a holiday, a trip to the beach or a funny story from the weekend, resist the temptation to compare, compete or ask unnecessary questions.

Instead, enjoy their excitement with them. Say things like: "It sounds like you had a wonderful time." "I'm so glad you enjoyed your weekend." These simple responses give your child permission to be happy without feeling guilty. No child should ever feel that loving one parent means hurting the other.

The Treehouse tip

Your child's relationship with the other parent is separate from your relationship with them. Protecting that relationship, where it is safe to do so, is a gift you give your child, not your former partner.

Separate Your Feelings From Your Parenting

This is often easier said than done. If your relationship ended painfully, you may not feel like communicating respectfully. There will be days when responding to a message feels frustrating. There may be moments when you disagree strongly with the other parent's decisions.

Before reacting, pause and ask yourself: "Am I responding as a former partner, or as a parent?" Those are two very different roles. As former partners, there may be unresolved emotions. As parents, your shared responsibility is to make decisions that support your child's wellbeing. The more you can separate these two roles, the easier it becomes to make child-focused decisions.

Keep Your Child Out of Adult Conversations

Children should never become messengers, investigators or negotiators. Avoid asking questions such as "What did Mommy do this weekend?" "Is Daddy seeing someone?" or "Tell your mom she still owes me the school fees."

Even when these questions seem harmless, they place children in the uncomfortable position of feeling responsible for adult communication. Whenever possible, communicate directly with the other parent. If a conversation is difficult, remember that your child does not need to witness it.

Respect the Other Parent's Time

One of the easiest ways to reduce conflict is to respect agreed parenting arrangements. Be on time for collections and drop-offs. Pack the things your child needs. Respond to messages within a reasonable time. If something unexpected happens, communicate as early as possible.

These may seem like small acts, but they build trust. More importantly, they reduce stress for your child. Children should not have to wonder whether one parent will arrive or whether another argument is about to happen in the driveway.

Don't Compete for Your Child's Affection

It is natural to want your child to enjoy spending time with you. Sometimes, however, parents begin competing without even realising it: buying bigger gifts, allowing fewer rules, planning extravagant outings, saying "yes" because they don't want to disappoint their child.

Children need love. They also need consistency. The parent who provides boundaries, routine and stability is giving their child something far more valuable than another toy. Remember, your child's affection is not a competition to be won.

Be Flexible When You Can

Life happens. Children get invited to birthday parties on the other parent's weekend. School events change. Families celebrate special occasions.

Being flexible does not mean giving up your role as a parent. It means recognising that your child's experiences are sometimes more important than sticking rigidly to a timetable. When flexibility is shown by both parents, children benefit enormously. Of course, flexibility should never come at the expense of safety or become one-sided. Healthy co-parenting requires mutual respect and reasonable communication.

Any flexibility must stay within the terms of existing orders. Ask a legal practitioner before making changes that may conflict with a court order.

Celebrate the Important Moments Together, If You Can

Only consider shared attendance where it is safe, suitable and consistent with any court or protection order. Separate attendance or other arrangements may protect your child from conflict.

There may be occasions when attending together is in your child's best interests: a school concert, a sports match, a prize-giving, a graduation. Your child should not have to spend these moments worrying about whether their parents will argue.

You don't need to sit together. You don't need to be friends. A simple greeting, a smile and respectful behaviour can mean the world to your child. It tells them, "Today is about you."

Introducing a New Partner

Few topics create more anxiety than introducing a new relationship. There is no perfect timeline, but one principle should guide every decision: ask whether this introduction is meeting your needs or your child's needs.

Children need time to adjust to one major change before being expected to adjust to another. Introducing a new partner too quickly can create confusion, loyalty conflicts and insecurity.

When the time is right, keep introductions low-key. Allow relationships to develop naturally. Never expect your child to immediately accept or love someone new. Relationships built slowly are often relationships that last.

Remember Your Long-Term Goal

The years of active parenting pass more quickly than most of us realise. One day there will be school graduations, weddings, grandchildren and family celebrations. The way you parent together now is helping shape those future moments.

Every respectful conversation. Every compromise. Every decision to protect your child from conflict. These are investments in your child's future wellbeing. Co-parenting is not about being perfect. It is about repeatedly asking, "What is best for my child?" Even when the answer is difficult.

What I Hope You Remember

Your marriage or relationship may have ended, but your child still deserves the love, guidance and support of both parents wherever it is safe and appropriate.

Children do not need parents who agree on everything. They need parents who are willing to put their disagreements aside long enough to remember what matters most.

When your child looks back on their childhood, they are unlikely to remember every parenting schedule or handover. They will remember whether they felt free to love both parents. They will remember whether they felt caught in the middle or protected from the conflict.

Key takeaway

"If my child were reading this chapter twenty years from now, would they feel that I protected their childhood?" If the answer is yes, you are moving in the right direction.

Before you agree to a parenting plan

One of the biggest mistakes parents make is believing that a parenting plan is simply a timetable. It is much more than that.

A good parenting plan doesn't just tell you where your child will sleep on a Tuesday night or who has Christmas this year. It provides clarity, reduces conflict and gives your child the stability they need to feel secure.

The best parenting plans are not written for parents. They are written for children. Every decision should answer one simple question: "Will this make life easier for my child?" If the answer is no, it's worth thinking again.

Think Beyond Next Week

When emotions are high, it's easy to focus on the immediate future: who will move out, who keeps the house, when will the children sleep where. These are important questions, but a parenting plan should also consider what life will look like in six months, two years and even ten years.

Children grow quickly. A parenting arrangement that works for a three-yearold may not suit a teenager. Build enough flexibility into your plan to allow your child to grow without having to renegotiate every stage of their life.

Keep Your Child's Routine in Mind

Children thrive on routine. When considering a parenting schedule, think about your child's ordinary week. Who takes them to school? When do they do homework? What extracurricular activities do they enjoy? Where do they feel most settled during the school week?

The goal should never be to divide time equally for the sake of fairness between parents. The goal is to create a routine that works for your child. Sometimes that will mean equal time. Sometimes it won't. Every family is different.

Think About More Than School Holidays

Many parenting plans deal with weekends and school holidays but overlook the moments that matter most to children. Take time to discuss:

- Birthdays
- Mother's Day and Father's Day
- Religious holidays
- Christmas and New Year
- Family birthdays
- School concerts, sports days and prize-givings
- Graduations

- Overseas travel
- Special family traditions

Having these conversations early can prevent unnecessary conflict later.

How Will You Communicate?

Where direct communication is unsafe, seek advice about an agreed safe channel or professional support. Your child must not become the messenger.

Many disagreements after separation arise not because parents disagree, but because they stop communicating. Think about practical questions: How will you share important school information? Who will communicate with teachers? How will medical appointments be arranged? What happens if one parent is running late? How will you deal with emergencies?

Agreeing on simple communication guidelines can prevent many misunderstandings. Keep communication respectful, brief and focused on your child. Not every message needs to revisit old arguments.

The Treehouse tip

Before sending a message to the other parent, ask yourself: Would I be comfortable if my child read this message one day? If the answer is no, rewrite it.

Give Your Child a Voice

A parenting plan should reflect your child's needs, not just the wishes of the adults. As children grow older, they may have views about their routines, friendships, extracurricular activities and how they move between homes.

Listening to your child does not mean asking them to settle an adult dispute or making them responsible for the result. In South Africa, a child able to participate has a right to do so appropriately, and their views must receive due consideration. Consider age, maturity and development, and seek suitable support where needed. Do not dismiss a child's wishes or concerns simply because the final decision rests with adults or a court.

However, they should feel heard when decisions directly affect their lives. Sometimes involving a neutral professional can help ensure your child's views are heard in a safe and age-appropriate way. The Samuel Lawson Foundation can assist with the voice of the child.

Be Careful About Making Children Keep Two Lives

Moving between homes can be tiring or confusing for some children, especially when expectations change sharply. Keep essential belongings available and use simple routines or calendars to make transitions more predictable.

While your homes do not need to be identical, some consistency can make a tremendous difference. Talk about homework expectations, bedtimes, screen time, school communication,

discipline and medical care.

Your child should not feel like they are constantly moving between two completely different worlds.

Remember That Circumstances Change

A parenting plan should respond to your child's changing needs. Review it at appropriate intervals, but obtain advice about the lawful process for changes. Reviewing an arrangement does not itself amend a registered plan or court order.

A plan made an order of court may be formally amended or terminated only by a further court order under section 34(5) of the Children's Act. A plan registered with the Family Advocate may be amended or terminated by the Family Advocate on application by the co-holders who are parties to it under section 34(4). Do not assume an informal agreement overrides an existing order.

Before You Finalise Any Agreement

Also check maintenance, education, health decisions, transport, safe handovers, dispute resolution and review arrangements. Seek individual legal advice before signing. A parenting plan must meet the child's best interests, be in writing and be signed by the parties. Formal registration or a court order may be appropriate.

Does this arrangement work for our child or only for us? Have we considered our child's age and stage of development? Will our child know where they are sleeping each night? Have we discussed birthdays, holidays and special occasions? Is communication between us likely to reduce or increase conflict? If our child read this plan in ten years' time, would they feel we put them first?

If you cannot confidently answer these questions, pause. It is easier to spend another hour discussing a parenting plan than it is to spend years arguing about one.

Key takeaway

A parenting plan is not about winning or losing. It is not about dividing a child equally between two parents. It is about creating a life where your child can continue to grow, learn, play and feel loved despite the changes happening around them. The best parenting plans are measured by how well they protect a child's childhood.

Helping your child feel heard

One of the greatest gifts you can give your child during separation is something that costs nothing: your attention.

Children do not always have the words to explain what they are feeling. In fact, many adults struggle to put their emotions into words, so we cannot expect children to do it with ease.

Some children will tell you exactly how they feel. Others won't. That doesn't mean they aren't hurting. Sometimes their feelings come out in ways we don't immediately recognise. A child who suddenly becomes clingy, starts arguing more often or bursts into tears over something seemingly insignificant may not be "acting out". They may simply be telling you, in the only way they know how, that life feels different and they don't yet know what to do with those feelings.

Rather than asking yourself, "How do I stop this behaviour?", try asking, "What might my child be trying to tell me?" That small shift in thinking can completely change the way you respond.

Listen More Than You Speak

As parents, our natural instinct is to fix things. When our child says they're sad, we want to make them happy. When they're worried, we want to reassure them immediately. Sometimes that's exactly what's needed. Other times, children simply need someone to listen.

If your child says "I miss Dad" or "I wish things could go back to how they were," you don't need to explain why the separation happened. You don't need to defend yourself. You don't even need to solve the problem.

Instead, try saying: "I can understand why you feel that way." "That must be really hard." "Thank you for telling me." Those simple responses tell your child something incredibly important: "My feelings are safe with you."

The Treehouse tip

When your child shares something difficult, resist the urge to interrupt or immediately offer advice. Pause. Listen. Sometimes your child needs to feel understood before they are ready to hear your guidance.

Behaviour Is Often Communication

Children do not always cry when they are hurting. Sometimes they become angry. Sometimes they withdraw. Sometimes they struggle to concentrate at school. Sometimes they become unusually helpful because they are trying to keep everyone happy.

Rather than seeing difficult behaviour as something to punish immediately, become curious. Has something changed? Is your child feeling anxious? Have they recently moved between homes? Are they worried about upsetting one parent by talking about the other?

Understanding the reason behind behaviour allows you to respond with both empathy and appropriate boundaries. Children still need limits. They simply need those limits delivered with compassion.

Create Opportunities to Talk

Not every child wants to sit down for a serious conversation. In fact, many children open up when they are doing something else: driving in the car, walking the dog, drawing, baking together, throwing a ball around.

These moments often feel less intimidating than sitting face-to-face asking, “How are you feeling?” You don't need to force the conversation. Simply make yourself available. Your child will often choose the moment.

Remember That Feelings Change

Your child may tell you they are fine today and feel completely different next week. That's normal. Grief doesn't follow a timetable.

As children grow, they understand separation differently. A five-year-old may worry about where they'll sleep. A twelve-year-old may begin asking why the relationship ended. A teenager may start thinking about what healthy relationships look like.

Keep the conversation open. Your child shouldn't feel that there is only one opportunity to ask questions.

Key takeaway

Your child does not need you to have all the answers. They need to know that whatever they are feeling, they can bring those feelings to you without fear of judgement. Feeling heard is one of the greatest protections you can offer a child during times of change. Long after they forget the conversations themselves, they will remember how safe they felt having them.

There is hope

If you've reached the end of this toolkit, we want to start by saying something that perhaps you haven't heard in a while.

You're doing better than you think.

No parent picks up a guide like this because life is easy. You are here because you care about your child. You want to make good decisions. You want to protect them from as much hurt as possible, even while navigating one of the most difficult seasons of your own life.

That alone says something about the kind of parent you are.

Throughout this toolkit, we've spoken about difficult conversations, helping your child adjust, co-parenting, parenting plans and recognising when your child may need additional support. If there is one message that connects every chapter, it is this:

Children don't need perfect parents. They need parents who keep choosing them.

There will be days when you get it wrong. You may lose your patience. You may say something you wish you hadn't. You may question whether you're making the right decisions.

That doesn't make you a bad parent.

What matters is being willing to reflect, apologise when necessary and change harmful behaviour. An apology should be followed by action. Children should not be expected to forgive repeated harm or provide reassurance to adults.

That doesn't make you a bad parent.

Children remember and revisit family changes in different ways. Your ongoing response matters: listen, protect them from harm, acknowledge mistakes and seek help when needed. There is no fixed timetable for adjustment.

Did they feel safe? Did they feel heard? Did they know they could love both parents without feeling guilty? Did they know that the adults in their lives were doing their very best to protect their childhood?

Those are the memories that stay with children long after the legal process has ended.

You Don't Have to Do This Alone

Asking for help is not a sign that you have failed. In fact, recognising when your family needs additional support is often one of the strongest and most loving decisions a parent can make.

Sometimes you may need guidance on how to communicate with the other parent. Sometimes your child may need a safe space to express their feelings. Sometimes maintaining or rebuilding a relationship between a child and a parent requires the support of experienced professionals.

Whatever your circumstances, you don't have to navigate this journey on your own.

The Samuel Lawson Foundation exists to support children and families through some of life's most challenging moments.

Our vision is simple: A world where children feel safe, seen and free to form healthy family connections.

The Treehouse Family Centre in Table View, Cape Town, provides child-focused support, including supervised contact, safe handovers, reunification support, child participation and family mediation. Our team reviews each referral to understand what support may be appropriate. Specialist care may require a referral to another professional.

Every family is different. If we are unable to provide the service you need, we will do our best to help you find someone who can. Sometimes one conversation is all it takes to help you feel less overwhelmed. Please don't wait until things become a crisis before reaching out.

A Promise to Your Child

Before you close this toolkit, take a moment to reflect. Not on everything that has gone wrong. But on what you can still choose from today.

You can choose to speak with kindness. You can choose to protect your child from conflict. You can choose to listen before you react. You can choose to ask for help when you need it. You can choose to place your child's wellbeing at the centre of every decision.

Those choices, repeated day after day, will shape your child's experience far more than any single conversation ever could.

THANK YOU

Thank you for taking the time to invest in your child.

One day, they may never know that you downloaded this toolkit or spent time thinking carefully about how to guide them through this season of life. They may never know how many difficult decisions you had to make behind the scenes.

But they will know how you made them feel.

If they grow up knowing they were loved unconditionally, protected from unnecessary conflict and free to have healthy relationships with the people who matter most, then you have given them something that will stay with them for the rest of their lives.

Thank you for allowing the Samuel Lawson Foundation to be part of your journey. We are honoured to walk alongside families as they navigate change, rebuild relationships and place children at the heart of every decision.

Together, we can help ensure that although a relationship may end, a child's opportunity to experience love, safety and connection never has to.

If you need guidance, support or simply someone to point you in the right direction, we invite you to contact us.

The Samuel Lawson Foundation Helping children feel safe, seen and free to form healthy family connections.

When your family needs more support

Notice changes without assuming a diagnosis

Seek advice from a suitable health or mental-health professional if distress persists, worsens or interferes with sleep, eating, school, play, relationships or daily routines. You can ask for help earlier if you are concerned; there is no need to wait for a fixed number of weeks.

Listen to concerns about visits

If a child is fearful or reluctant about contact, listen calmly and seek advice. Do not assume the reason is manipulation, ordinary adjustment or abuse without assessment. Avoid repeated questioning and pressure to show affection. Existing orders and immediate safety concerns need professional attention.

Urgent help

If there is immediate danger, serious injury, a threat of harm or a child cannot be kept safe, seek urgent help from emergency services, police or an appropriate health service. The Treehouse referral form and email are not emergency services.

Support adapted to your child

For an autistic child or a child with sensory, developmental or communication needs, use their preferred way of communicating. Visual schedules, concrete language, familiar objects, quieter spaces, advance preparation and extra time for transitions may help. Ask what works for this child rather than assuming every child needs the same approach. Consult their treating or support professionals where appropriate.

Parents need support too

Seek your own support if grief, anxiety, depression, alcohol or substance use, anger or exhaustion is affecting your ability to care safely. Asking for help is a responsible step. A mental-health diagnosis or disability does not, by itself, determine parenting ability or the appropriate contact arrangement.

Your conversation preparation sheet

Complete this for each child. Adapt it to their communication needs and the safety of your family.

Who will speak to my child, and is it safe to speak together?

What arrangements are confirmed, and what is still undecided?

What simple explanation will I use?

What reassurance can I honestly give?

Which routines, people and belongings can remain familiar?

How will I make space for questions and feelings afterwards?

Who can help if my child or I need more support?

Parenting-plan discussion checklist

Use this to prepare for professional advice or a safe, suitable discussion. This worksheet is not a parenting plan, an agreement or permission to change a court order.

- Current court/protection orders and safety restrictions
- Each child's needs, views, age and development
- Residence, contact and predictable daily routines
- Safe collection, transport and separate handovers where needed
- Maintenance, school costs, medical expenses and practical responsibilities
- Education, health decisions, culture and religious upbringing
- Holidays, birthdays, travel and required consents
- Communication between adults and sharing essential information
- Specialist support, disability access and sensory/communication needs
- How disagreements will be managed safely
- When to review the plan and the lawful process for changes
- Independent advice before signing and appropriate formalisation

Questions I need to take to a professional

A first step towards support

You do not need to know which service to choose. Tell us what your family needs help with through the online referral form. The team will review the referral and explain the support available and the next steps.

The Treehouse Family Centre

234 Blaauwberg Road, Table View, Cape Town. Visits are by appointment.

Call: [076 898 6562](tel:0768986562)

WhatsApp: [Message our team](#)

Email: admin@samuellawsonfoundation.org

Referral: portal.samuellawsonfoundation.org

Website: samuellawsonfoundation.org

Support within reach

Reduced-fee and pro bono services may be available to qualifying families, subject to financial assessment, funding and capacity. If affordability is a concern, let us know. The applicable fee will be explained before services begin.

Sources and further reading

This guide draws on child-focused practice and the following sources. International parenting guidance is used for general support; South African law governs the legal references.

Children's Act 38 of 2005, especially sections 7, 10, 31, 33 and 34.

[Department of Justice: Children's Act](#)

American Academy of Pediatrics: How to Support Children after Their Parents Separate or Divorce.

[Read the parenting guidance](#)

American Academy of Pediatrics: Divorce and Separation: How to Help Your Child Adjust.

[Read the adjustment guidance](#)

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