

## FACT SHEET 8

# Changeovers and helping your child move between their two homes

### 1. What to expect at a changeover between parents

- Nearly all children find moving between two homes extremely stressful at first.
- Young children are often clingy, cry and put up a fight.
- Older children often complain and say they don't want to go.
- Children will feel more settled once their new arrangements have become their usual routine. This might take a long time.

### 2. Understand why your child may be upset about moving between homes

- It's hard for your child to leave you behind, because they love you and don't want to be without you.
- Your child may feel guilty about going away to have a good time with their other parent because they worry about you being left behind.
- Older children can find a change of home base annoying and difficult to manage, especially with homework, seeing friends, sports and other activities.
- If there is usually conflict (arguments, criticism) between parents at changeovers, this can make moving between homes even more upsetting for children.

### 3. What you can do to help reduce your child's stress

#### When your child is leaving you...

##### Do –

- Gently encourage your child about going with their other parent. Be relaxed and positive.
- Remind your child about the fun things they have done before with their other parent and about the good things about their relationship.
- Make plans with your child for some fun things you can do together when they get back.
- Help your child to manage their things they need to take: clothes, special toys, homework, sports gear.

##### Don't –

- Don't say "I'll miss you". Tell your child that you'll be OK and about the good things you've planned so they don't feel guilty.
- Don't put your child in to an awful position with your ex by asking them to take difficult messages or to act as a spy.
- Don't break into your child's time with their other parent. It can be too unsettling for them.

## **When your child is coming to stay with you ...**

### **Do –**

- Let them know before they come about the good things you've planned to do together so they have something to look forward to.
- Help them to adjust to the changeover by giving them extra love and care.
- If finances are stretched (as they usually are after separation) do lots of fun free things like gardening, going to the park or the beach.
- Help them to feel safe and at home and make sure they have a space for themselves and somewhere special to keep their things.
- Plan to take good care of their basic needs for food and sleep. Regular shared mealtimes are reassuring and sociable.
- Remember you need to be able to act as 'lifeguard' in an emergency (such as an accident or sickness) any time your child is with you.
- Encourage your child to have contact with their other parent while they are with you, maybe through a phone call.

### **Don't –**

- Don't add to your child's stress by making a fuss about things they haven't brought with them.

## **4. Manage conflict at changeovers**

- Avoid saying anything negative to your child's other parent at a changeover.
- Be reasonably flexible and understanding about unavoidable lateness with things like traffic problems.
- Save your concerns and criticisms for another time, away from your child.
- If contact with your child's other parent always leads to conflict, then use a third person or a school as a neutral drop-off point.

## **5. Understand why your child might be upset when they come back to your home**

- Your child may be tired and upset about leaving their other parent.
- Your child might be feeling guilty about having a good time without you, especially if you seem sad or too emotional when they get back.
- Your child may be upset by your questions. They may not know what to say without hurting your feelings or being disloyal to their other parent.

## 6. Helping your children when they get back

- When your child gets back, make some allowances for them and give extra care to help them through, with food, sleep and affection.
- Take good care of yourself so you're ok when they get back – see friends, do things you enjoy. Get exercise to manage stress. Don't drink too much.
- Don't pressure your child with too many questions, and never ask them for sensitive information about your ex ("Has he/she got a girlfriend/boyfriend?").
- Don't criticise your child's other parent or their parenting in front of your child. Remember, different parenting is good for them and nobody's perfect.
- Keep checking that the arrangements for sharing day-to-day care are working for your child as their needs change.

## 7. Remember it's worth it

- Even though it can be difficult at times, in the long run the best way your child can get through your separation is to have a close relationship with both their parents.
- Spending time with both parents is the best way your children can keep these relationships going. That usually means moving between two homes.
- The short-term problems in getting through changeovers are real, but will do much less harm than losing a close relationship with a parent.
- With your support, changeovers will get easier for your child over time.
- Consider the needs of each child for the best arrangements for their age and stage: see the Family Court's *Parenting Plans*.

## 8. Some exceptions

- It can be too hard for a child to travel alone to see a parent. They may need an adult to go with them, depending on their age and state of mind.
- It is **not** normal for a child to seem frightened about going with a parent – take this seriously and get advice from your facilitator if you are worried.



This handout was written by Julia Maskiil and Dr Kerry Gould for the Ministry of Justice (2007) and provides additional information to that provided in the free 'Parenting Through Separation' programme delivered for the Ministry of Justice. For details of programmes in your area phone 0800 211 211. There is more information available for parents who have separated from [www.justice.govt.nz/family](http://www.justice.govt.nz/family)