

Co-parenting from separate houses



Relate



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1. About this resource

Learning how to co-parent well can be challenging.

Regardless of how you arrived at the decision to co-parent, it can feel like a significant upheaval in your life. While this transition may be the best thing for everyone involved, it's possible to build a cooperative and supportive co-parenting relationship if both parents are committed to putting in the effort.

That's why we've created this toolkit – to hold space for all the emotions you're feeling and to guide you through this complex time. The exercises, reflections, and resources here are crafted with empathy and understanding by our team of relationship experts, aiming to help you and your co-parent navigate this journey at your own pace.

This toolkit doesn't prescribe a one-size-fits-all solution because every family and every co-parenting situation is unique. Instead, it offers you a variety of tools and perspectives, empowering you to choose what feels right for your specific circumstances.

2. What is co-parenting?

Just as our families are unique, everyone's experience of a separation is unique, too.



Co-parenting is the shared responsibility of raising children after a separation or divorce, and it requires ongoing teamwork between parents to ensure their child's well-being. It's a journey that often involves navigating a mix of emotions, including anger, loneliness, relief, and guilt. These feelings can fluctuate, making the process feel anything but straightforward.

You'll notice that we use the term 'co-parent' instead of 'ex-partner' because for children, there is no ex.

Co-parenting isn't about perfection; it's about prioritising the child's (or children's) needs above all else. It involves open communication, mutual respect, and a commitment to maintaining consistency in the child's life. This can be challenging, especially when emotions run high, but focusing on your child's happiness and stability can provide a common goal.

Even when the end of a relationship brings a sense of liberation or excitement for a new beginning, co-parenting can still feel overwhelming. It's also unlikely that both parents are experiencing the same emotions; you might be on quite different stages of the journey at times. It requires patience, flexibility, and sometimes outside support, like counselling or mediation, to help manage conflicts and ensure both parents are working together effectively.

Remember, co-parenting is about creating a supportive and loving environment for your child, even if it means navigating complex and shifting emotions along the way.



3. Establishing ground rules

Establishing a parenting agreement for co-parenting can help navigate the emotional whirlwind that follows a breakup.

Even when a separation has been expected, it's common to feel a sense of shock or numbness. Setting clear guidelines can provide a bit of order amidst the chaos, helping both parents feel more in control.

Deciding on how you want your child's upbringing to look in terms of routines, discipline and lifestyle is a crucial first step. Agreeing on these can be challenging, especially when emotions are raw, but it's essential for providing a safe environment for your child.

Communication is another vital component. Agreeing on how and when to communicate about your child's needs can prevent misunderstandings and reduce conflict, allowing both parents to feel heard and respected.

Co-parenting is rarely a straightforward process, and it's normal to experience a range of feelings. Conflict is normal and disagreeing is not always a bad thing if you can resolve it peacefully.

By agreeing and respecting ground rules, you create a framework that supports both of you as parents and provides stability for your child. This collaborative approach can help you move forward, even as you navigate the back-and-forth of complex emotions.

There's enough guilt to endure as a parent without piling it on yourself after a separation, so please do treat yourself with kindness too!

Exercise: Create a co-parenting agreement

Together, draft an agreement covering communication, decision-making, scheduling, finances, and conflict resolution and commit to reviewing and updating it regularly.

Have a look at the following questions to help you build your agreement.

What are our core values for our child?

How will we handle communication?

What is our approach to discipline?

How will we make major decisions about our child?

4. Effective communication

Effective communication is key to successful co-parenting.

Clear and respectful communication can help manage any difficult feelings and create a stable environment for your child.

Start by agreeing on how and when you'll communicate about your child's needs and activities. Whether it's through scheduled check-ins, co-parenting apps, or emails, having a consistent method can prevent misunderstandings and reduce conflict.

It's also important to try and listen to each other with empathy and patience (not always easy, we know!).

If you're feeling overwhelmed or frustrated, take a moment before responding. Respectful communication helps both parents feel heard and valued, paving the way for a cooperative and supportive co-parenting relationship.



Exercise: Create a communication plan

You might find it helpful if between you, you create a communication plan.

This can be a helpful way to know what to expect in terms of communication and to set boundaries as you move through what could be some difficult transitions.

For example, how will you communicate? Via text, email, co-parenting apps?

Would it be helpful to utilise a shared calendar for important dates and events? (More on this in the next section.)

Could you use the Relate ‘sounding board’ chatbot on our website to help you word your communication? You can find out more about this at the end of the toolkit.

Consider the following questions when you’re putting your plan together:

What topics require regular communication?

How can we maintain respectful communication?

What are our triggers, and how can we manage conflict?

If you know that discussing your child's clothing/possessions causes conflict (what they have at your house/your co-parent's house and who it belongs to) then really think together how you might broach this with each other.

Try and come up with practical suggestions like what you might need to keep at each home (so having two sets of some things) and what needs to travel with the child. Dedicate a day in each home for laundry and setting aside sports kits, etc.

Exercise: Role play

If it's not too awkward, you could try role-playing conversations you might have together to practice constructive communication.



Struggling to communicate?

We'll cover conflict in a little more detail further on in the toolkit. While it may take a little while to get into a flow of communication with your co-parent, we can help.

Relate have Centres across England and Wales and a network of licensed local counsellors offering counselling in person, over the phone and online. We also offer specific co-parenting programmes in some centres.

And if you're not quite ready to speak to anyone yet, we have loads of self-help resources to look through on our website instead.

5. Scheduling and staying consistent

Scheduling and consistency are vital in co-parenting to provide your child with a sense of stability and security, and establishing a clear and reliable routine can help create a predictable environment for them.

Start by discussing and agreeing on a schedule that accommodates school, activities, and both parents' commitments.

Using a shared calendar, whether digital or physical, can keep everyone informed and organised. This ensures that important dates, appointments, and events are tracked and accessible to both parents. Regularly reviewing and adjusting the schedule as needed can help maintain a balance that works for everyone involved.

Consistency extends beyond just the schedule; it's about maintaining similar routines and rules in both households.

This can help your child feel more secure and less anxious about moving between homes. Open communication between parents about these routines and any necessary changes can contribute to your child experiencing a 'teamwork' approach to their care which in turn will make them feel safe emotionally.

By prioritising scheduling and consistency, you create a nurturing and stable environment that supports your child's well-being during change.

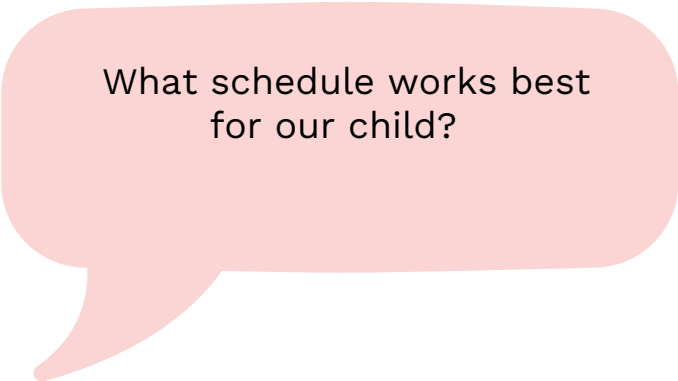
Exercise: Create a shared calendar

Create a shared calendar with your co-parent.

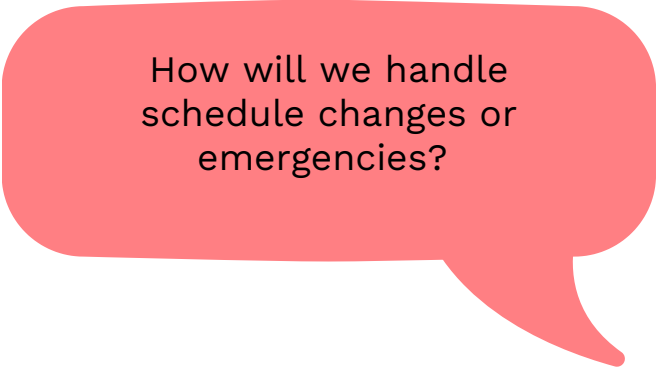
Here you can include important events that impact both of you as parents, e.g., visitations, school events, appointments, activities.

There are a few free options that only require you to have an email address and they're intuitive and simple to use, for e.g., Microsoft calendar, Google calendar.

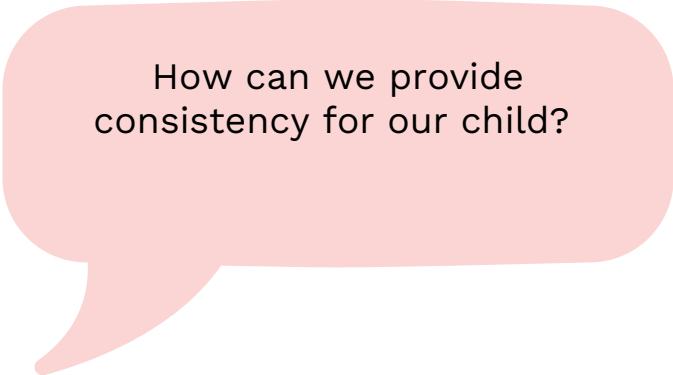
When you're updating your calendar, consider these reflective questions:



What schedule works best for our child?



How will we handle schedule changes or emergencies?



How can we provide consistency for our child?

While consistency is important, it can help to keep the harmony between parents by being graceful with one another, and allowing flexibility where needed. You never know when you may need the flexibility, so try to consider both perspectives.

6. Managing transitions



Managing transitions between two homes can be challenging for both parents and children, but with a bit of planning and empathy, it can be made smoother.

It's normal for children to feel a mix of emotions when moving between homes, and as parents, being sensitive to their feelings can make a big difference.

Creating a special routine or ritual for saying goodbye and hello can provide a sense of comfort and predictability for your child. Whether it's a favourite stuffed animal that travels with them, a special phrase, or a small activity you do together, these rituals can help your child adjust more easily. If your child is a bit older, it also helps to 'tune in' as often as possible.

Teenagers can sometimes open up more in situations like car journeys or while you are doing something else at home (this could be feeding your pets or folding laundry - a good time to ask 'how are you doing?')

Communication is key in managing transitions effectively. Keep each other informed about any changes in the schedule or any issues that arise. Discussing and planning for these transitions together can help minimise confusion and ensure that your child's needs are met.

By being patient and supportive, you can help your child navigate the changes in environment with greater ease and confidence, helping them to feel loved and secure in both homes.

Exercise: Create a transition plan

Develop a transition plan including routines and activities for your child to help ease transitions.

You may find it helpful to create a checklist of essential items for the child to bring when travelling between both homes.

How can we ease transitions between homes for our child?

What routines can help our child feel secure?

How will we handle belongings that move between homes?

7. Handling conflict

Conflict is inevitable, especially during the emotionally charged process of co-parenting after a separation.

However, how you handle conflict can significantly impact your child's well-being. It's essential to approach conflicts with empathy and understanding, recognising that both parents may have different perspectives and feelings.

Here are a few things that may help when handling conflict:

- When disagreements arise, take a step back and try to understand the feelings of everyone involved.
- Active listening and validation of each other's feelings can help you both feel understood. 'I can see how you might have thought that, but this is where I was coming from...'
- Remember, it's okay to take a break if emotions are running high but commit to returning to the conversation once things have cooled down.



- Establishing ground rules for resolving conflicts can provide a framework for navigating disagreements in a respectful and productive manner.
- Agree on strategies such as using "I" statements, focusing on the issue at hand rather than personal attacks, and seeking compromise whenever possible.
- If you find yourselves at a point where you can't see the way forward, consider involving a neutral third party, such as a mediator or counsellor, to help facilitate communication and find a resolution that works for everyone.

Relate offer a range of services, including couples counselling and co-parenting programmes to reduce conflict. You can find out more in detail at the end of the toolkit.

Above all, keep the best interests of your child at the forefront of your discussions. Disagreements are an opportunity to model healthy conflict resolution skills and prioritise working together, something that will be valuable for your child's development.



Exercise: Conflict resolution 'strategy'

Together, outline steps for resolving disagreements. A few examples include enabling time to 'cool down' and using 'I' statements.



Using 'I' statements

"I" statements are a communication technique used to express feelings, thoughts, and concerns in a non-confrontational and empathetic manner.

Instead of placing blame or making accusations, "I" statements focus on personal experiences and emotions, encouraging understanding and empathy in conversations.

For example, instead of saying, "You never help with household chores," you could use an "I" statement like, "I feel overwhelmed when I have to manage all the household chores by myself." This allows the other person to understand how their actions impact you without feeling attacked or defensive.

By using "I" statements, you can create a more open and respectful dialogue, leading to better communication and conflict resolution in your relationships.

8. Supporting your child's wellbeing



As you navigate the journey of co-parenting from separate homes, your child's well-being remains the top priority.

This transition can stir up a whirlwind of emotions for them, from excitement to uncertainty. Your role as a parent is to provide them with a steady anchor amidst these changes.

First and foremost, create a safe space for open communication. Encourage your child to express their feelings, thoughts, and concerns without fear of judgment.

Listening fully validates their experiences and fosters trust in your relationship. Let them know that it's okay to feel whatever emotions they're experiencing and assure them of your unwavering support and love.

Try 'tuning in' each day - depending on their age this could be through play, discussion or doing an activity together. This can also assist with your own coping strategies - consider questions like:

- How am I feeling today and why?
- If this is because of difficulties in the relationship with my child's other parent, how can I overcome this?
- What is my child thinking and feeling right now?
- How can I separate my feelings about their other parent, from theirs?

Consistency is key in supporting your child's well-being across both households. Strive to maintain similar routines, rules, and expectations to provide a sense of stability and predictability. This helps alleviate any anxiety or confusion your child may feel about moving between homes, allowing them to feel secure and grounded in both environments.

Additionally, prioritise quality time spent together. Engage in activities that bring joy and connection, whether it's playing games, exploring nature, or simply sharing stories. These moments of togetherness strengthen your bond and reassure your child of your presence and commitment to their happiness.

Lastly, stay attuned to any signs that may indicate your child is struggling emotionally. Changes in behaviour, mood swings, or difficulty adjusting may signal a need for additional support. Don't hesitate to seek professional help if necessary, as therapy or counselling can provide valuable tools and resources to help your child navigate their emotions with resilience and confidence.


Exercise: Schedule emotional check-ins

Schedule regular check-ins with your child to discuss their feelings about the co-parenting agreement.

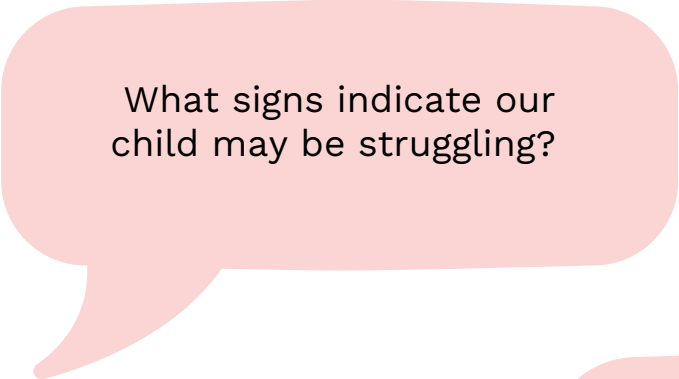
If your child struggles to talk, encourage them to communicate in a different way, for example, through writing, playing a board game or drawing.

Use this check in time as an opportunity to reassure them of both parent's commitment to their wellbeing.

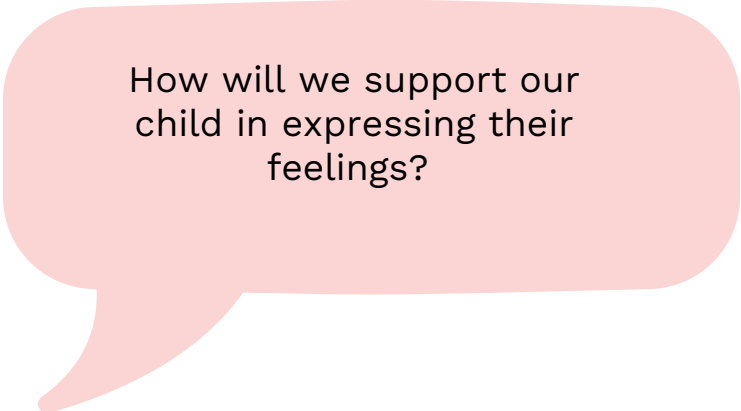
Here are a few questions for you as parents to consider together:



How can we ensure our child feels supported in both homes?



What signs indicate our child may be struggling?



How will we support our child in expressing their feelings?

9. Self care for parents



Amidst the responsibilities of co-parenting from separate homes, it's easy for parents to neglect their own well-being. However, taking care of yourself is essential to be the best parent you can be for your child. Remember, you can't pour from an empty cup!

Start by carving out time for self-care, even if it's just a few minutes each day. Whether it's going for a walk, practicing mindfulness, or indulging in a hobby you love, prioritise activities that recharge and rejuvenate you.

This not only reduces stress but also sets a positive example for your child about the importance of self-care. Try and remember that emotions don't stay high forever, and you are laying the groundwork for a happy family dynamic.

Maintaining a support network is equally important. Lean on friends, family members or support groups for emotional support and encouragement. Sharing your experiences with others who understand can provide valuable perspective and validation, helping you feel less alone on your co-parenting journey.

Additionally, don't hesitate to seek professional help if needed. Therapy or counselling can provide a safe space to explore your feelings, learn coping strategies, and gain insight into your co-parenting dynamics. Relate can support you with groups for separated parents or individual counselling. Taking this step demonstrates strength and resilience, showing your child that it's okay to ask for help when needed.

Lastly, practice self-compassion. Parenting is filled with ups and downs, and it's okay to not have all the answers. Be gentle with yourself, celebrate your successes, and learn from your challenges. Use affirmations like “I can do this - I'm strong.”, “I am a capable, lovable person” and “this too shall pass.”




Exercise: Create a self care plan

Create a plan for managing stress and maintaining well-being, for example, getting regular exercise and enjoying hobbies.

It can be helpful to schedule in regular self-care time for yourself (in the same way you schedule in time for others, for example for work and for family).

Encourage your co-parent to do the same. Good self-care has proven benefits in improving physical and emotional wellness, which in turn has positive benefits on your loved ones. You may want to encourage your child to do the same, too.

Reflect on the following questions when putting together your self-care plan:



What support systems can we rely on?

How can we take care of our own health while co-parenting?

How can we model positive self-care habits?

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10. Quiz

Answer each question honestly, choosing the response that best reflects your situation or feelings.

At the end of the quiz, review your answers to gain insights into areas where you may need to focus or improve in your co-parenting journey.

How do you currently communicate with your co-parent regarding your child's needs and activities?

- A. Regularly through phone calls or face-to-face meetings
- B. Mostly through text messages or emails
- C. Communication is sporadic or strained

How would you describe the consistency of your co-parenting schedule?

- A. We have a well-established schedule that works for both of us
- B. Our schedule is somewhat inconsistent but manageable
- C. We struggle to maintain a consistent schedule

How do you handle transitions when your child moves between homes?

- A. We have established routines and rituals to ease transitions
- B. Transitions are sometimes challenging, but we manage to work through them
- C. Transitions are often chaotic or stressful for our child

How do you and your co-parent typically resolve disagreements or conflicts?

- A. We are able to communicate openly and find solutions together
- B. We sometimes have disagreements but usually find a resolution
- C. Conflict resolution is often difficult or leads to further tension

How flexible are you and your co-parent in accommodating each other's schedules or needs?

- A. We are both willing to be flexible and make compromises when necessary
- B. Flexibility varies depending on the situation but is generally manageable
- C. Flexibility is limited, leading to frequent conflicts or misunderstandings

How would you rate the overall impact of your co-parenting arrangement on your child's well-being?

- A. Our co-parenting arrangement positively contributes to our child's happiness and stability
- B. There are some challenges, but we strive to prioritise our child's well-being
- C. Our co-parenting arrangement has a negative impact on our child's well-being

Results

Scoring

For each question, give yourself:

- 2 points for Option A
- 1 point for Option B
- 0 points for Option C

Your results

- 10-12 points: This score suggests you are navigating co-parenting from different homes successfully, with effective communication and a focus on your child's well-being
- 6-9 points: You are making efforts to co-parent effectively, but there may be areas where you can improve. Consider discussing any challenges with your co-parent and seeking support if needed
- 0-5 points: Co-parenting from separate households may be challenging for you, with communication and conflict resolution posing significant obstacles. It's essential to prioritise your child's needs and consider seeking additional support to improve your co-parenting relationship



11. Further support

There are a few different ways Relate can help.

Ongoing counselling

Ongoing counselling is one of the main ways we support people to strengthen their relationships. In ongoing counselling, you'll be matched with a counsellor who will work with you over a defined period of time.

You can attend ongoing counselling on your own, or with your partner.

Co-parenting every day (CoPE)

CoPE is a programme that you can undertake with your co-parent whether you are together or separated.

The sessions are designed to bring you together and think about how to overcome challenges following a separation. Patterns of conflict are addressed and parents are encouraged to think about the impact of their co-parenting relationship on their children.

Chat with a counsellor

Not ready to commit to ongoing counselling or a programme?

That's okay. We're here to listen and support you to find a way forward. You can schedule a 30-minute chat with one of our counsellors to get things off your chest and talk through your options for next steps.

One session therapy

One session therapy helps you work through a specific issue quickly.

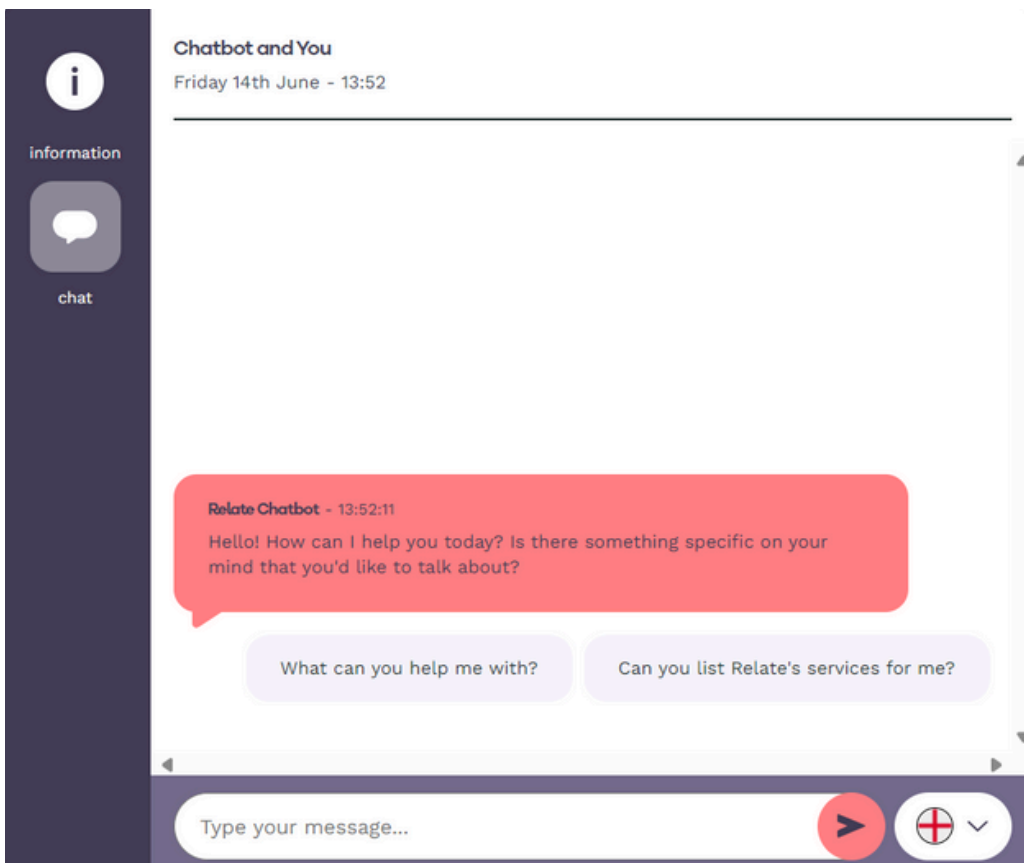
It's perfect for individuals or couples who can identify one specific skill they want to build or problem they want to work on.

Relate ChatBots

We can Relate to parental conflict. Relate's tools are here to help you handle problems with your partner or co-parent.

RelateBot

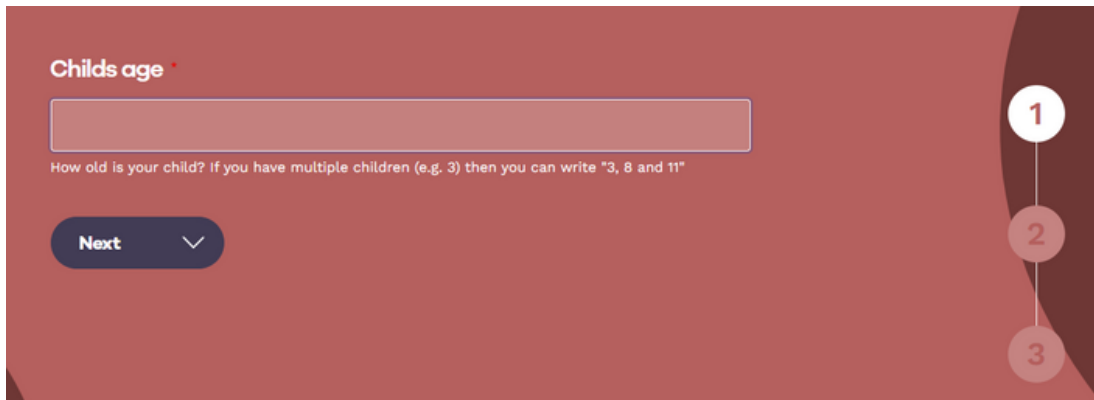
Chat to the RelateBot - share what you're going through and get answers, support, and advice to help you get through conflicts with your partner or co-parent.



'In the middle' Bot

Do conversations with you and your partner or co-parent often turn into arguments? Do you wonder how your child is coping? Are you worried about the impact that the conflict is having on your family?

The 'in the middle' Bot is a chatbot that's trained on how your child experiences your relationship. With a small amount of information and zero judgement from us, you can get insight into how your child might be feeling.



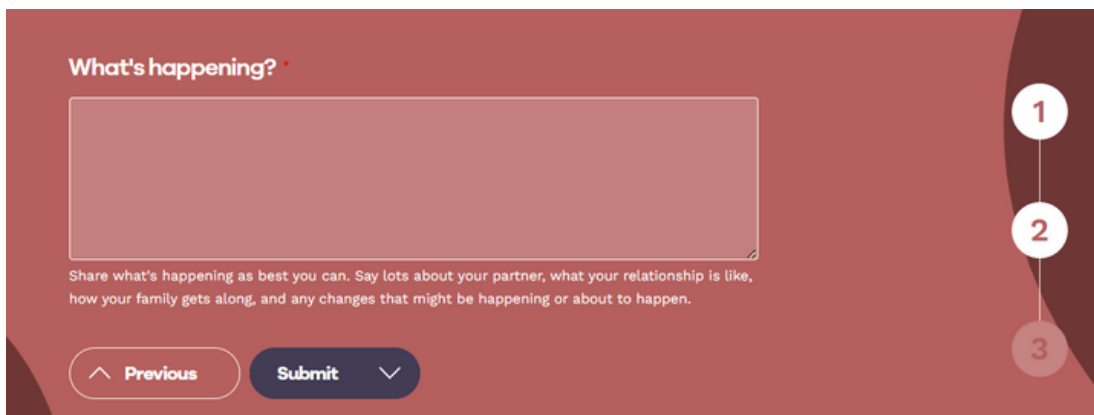
Child's age *

How old is your child? If you have multiple children (e.g. 3) then you can write "3, 8 and 11"

Next ▾

1
2
3

In this section, you'll be asked how old is your child. If you have multiple children (e.g. 3) then you can write "3, 8 and 11".



What's happening? *

Share what's happening as best you can. Say lots about your partner, what your relationship is like, how your family gets along, and any changes that might be happening or about to happen.

Previous ▹ Submit ▾

1
2
3

Here you can share what's happening as best as you can. Say lots about your partner, what your relationship is like, how your family gets along, and any changes that might be happening or about to happen.

Your submission

About your children



About your situation



Response

What might your child think?



How might your child feel?



How might your child react?



What should you do?

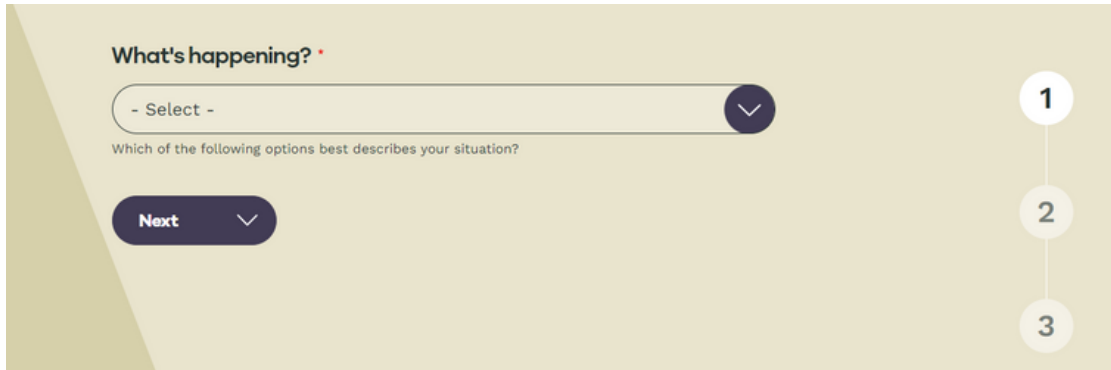


Click on the dropdown arrows to see responses to your situation. There's a mix of answers from what might your child think, how might your child feel, how might your child react and what should you do.

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The 'sounding board' Bot

Made for parents who are having disagreements, this tool helps you write emails, text messages, or get ready to talk with your partner or co-parent. Relate's "sounding board" bot is here to help you keep your messages clear, polite, and positive.



The screenshot shows a form titled "What's happening?" with a red asterisk. Below the title is a dropdown menu with the text "- Select -" and a downward arrow. Underneath the dropdown is the text "Which of the following options best describes your situation?". Below that is a "Next" button with a downward arrow. To the right of the form is a vertical progress indicator with three numbered circles (1, 2, 3), where circle 1 is highlighted.

By clicking the drop down arrow you can select from the options that best describes what's happening. For e.g., co-parenting from separate households.



The screenshot shows a form titled "What are you trying to say?" with a red asterisk. Below the title is a large text input area. Below the input area is the text "Share what's happening and what you're trying to say to your partner or co-parent.". Below that are two buttons: "Previous" with an upward arrow and "Submit" with a downward arrow. To the right of the form is a vertical progress indicator with three numbered circles (1, 2, 3), where circle 2 is highlighted.

Here you can share what's happening and what you're trying to say to your partner or co-parent.

Your submission

About your home situation



About your message



Response

General advice for your situation



How to word your message



Click on the dropdown arrows to see responses to your situation. There's a mix of answers from general advice for your situation and how to word your message.

[Visit the AI tools here](#)

Relate

Chat to us

Relate are the nation's leading relationship charity.

We have a network of Relate Centres across the UK and a group of licensed local counsellors and relationship experts that provide face-to-face counselling and support.

You might have realised that your relationships need a bit of TLC - and that's totally normal. So if you need a chat, we're here for you.

www.relate.org.uk

Did you find this toolkit helpful? Check out these other toolkits available on our website:

- Building a modern family
- Setting boundaries with family members
- Repairing family relationships