



**voices**  
in the middle

**How to talk to your teenager about divorce and separation**

A conversation guide for parents of 15-18 year olds

# Introduction

This guide is for parents of 15-18 year olds experiencing divorce and separation in their family. It is written to help you have a conversation with your teenager about this difficult topic.

Voices in the Middle is a collaboration between young people, the family law & mediation sector and The Family Initiative charity to provide a dedicated place for young people to find help and support when in the middle of divorce and separation.

This guide has been written following input from our teenage volunteers working with Voices in the Middle and reflects the issues they feel are important for parents to understand.

The quotations in this guide also come from stories that have been shared by the young people we work with and who have been in the middle of their parents splitting up.

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## Supported by Woolley & Co Solicitors

This guide has been created by our Voices in the Middle team including our teenage volunteers, with the support of Woolley & Co Solicitors

[www.family-lawfirm.co.uk](http://www.family-lawfirm.co.uk)





# Your Teenagers Perspective

## Multiple Pressures

The later teenage years bring multiple pressures for teenagers, as they go through exam stress, worry about their first steps in the world of work and negotiate major changes in their lives. Big changes in their family circumstances add a lot to these pressures.

Once you know that separation will be your next step, make a realistic plan and consider how you can support:

- Looking at courses / jobs / universities / new homes together
- Creating a safe environment at home including support for exam revision
- If they are moving out of the home, making sure they see both parents
- Making clear future financial arrangements
- Helping them to move into any new accommodation

Think these through as you plan to talk with your teenager about separation. This will ensure that you are clear on how your support for them and the important things in their life will continue.

“I learnt that it takes both parents to be mature enough to be aware of their children, and how their decisions are going to impact their lives.”

Ellie (16)

## Family and Feelings

Every family is different and your teenager may seem very engaged or not much at all. Either way, your teenager is at a stage of life where they are becoming more independent and gaining a sense of identity that is distinct from the family.

However, whilst expressing solidarity with friends and others, teenage children are still more likely to get their values from the family. Just because divorce is more common in society, it does not mean that it will upset your teenager less.

**“My panic attacks became more frequent and I didn't feel like I had anyone to talk to. The only thing I had to keep my calm was my sport”**

**Bryony (16)**

They might pull away and become less communicative. They might need more time to express their feelings and understand how the separation will affect them. Common reactions can include anger, under-performance at school, sleeplessness, defiance or signs of sadness and depression.

Be aware that the change in your family life will have an impact on your teenager's emotional health and wellbeing. The occasional bad mood or 'acting out' is to be expected but other more serious problems might appear and then you should seek extra help for your teenager. depression.

## School

Inform your teenager's teachers and school about your situation at home and ensure that they understand that they might see changes in their behaviour and grades during this period. It is very important for your teenager to be able to go to school and feel accepted there.

**“You automatically think it's your fault or you had part in it, but it's not, it's between the parents”**

**Sammie (17)**

**“Divorce for any young person is one of the most crucial and defining moments of their lives. Sure, it gets better with time, but it never leaves you.”**

**Jess (17)**



# Top Things To Do and Not To Do

This is what our young people who have been through their parent's splitting up have to say:



DO

## **tell them that family relationships will be sustained**

The family will change, but for the majority of people, your teenager's relationships with family members will stay.



DON'T

## **coach your child to take your side.**

Don't tell them what to say to your partner and how to relate to them. Parents can do this unintentionally. Tell your teenager specifically that you don't want them to take sides.



DO

## **tell them both parents still love them and will keep on doing that whatever changes happen.**



DON'T

## **talk negatively about your partner to your teenager.**

If your partner is indeed responsible for any abuse or neglect, keep it factual and focused on the negative behaviour rather than the person (e.g. "they are doing a bad thing", not "they are bad".)



DO

## **tell them it's not their fault.**

You can see that you are sorry and that you did not mean things to turn out this way. As well as not being their fault, it is also not their responsibility to try to fix things – the relationship between you and your partner is your own affair.



DO

## **listen very carefully to what your teenager says.**

Ask about their concerns and suggestions about how to organise the future. They can often see solutions you cannot and they know better than you what is important to them. But also make clear they are not responsible for making decisions – only you do that.



DO

## **give them space and privacy to react and be prepared for negativity.**

This is an incredibly difficult situation for them and working through it will take time, perhaps a lot of time.



DON'T

## **cry while you talk if you need to, but don't break down completely or raise your voice.**

If you start reacting unhelpfully, do things you know help to keep you calm, for example, deep breathing or time out.



DO

## **be honest and clear.**

Only promise things you can guarantee to deliver. If you have already decided on changes – one parent moving out, for example – be clear and precise about it.

"Don't bad mouth each other. We want to be able to form our own opinions even though you might not love them any more, we do"

Josie (15)

# Planning the Conversation

Deciding how to tell your teenager about your separation is difficult. When doing it, think about your teenager's emotional and behavioural development so far and consider what is appropriate for them to know.

Don't over-plan the conversation so that you come across unnatural. Your teenager knows you well and will spot this and might think you are making things up or hiding things.

Each teenager is different and therefore may not react the same as others.

## Talk to your teenager together

It is very beneficial for both parents to be present for this conversation, if at all possible. Talk to your partner about it early and plan what to say together so there is only one version of the story. If both parents being present is not an option, try to have separate conversations but agree ahead what you are going to disclose.

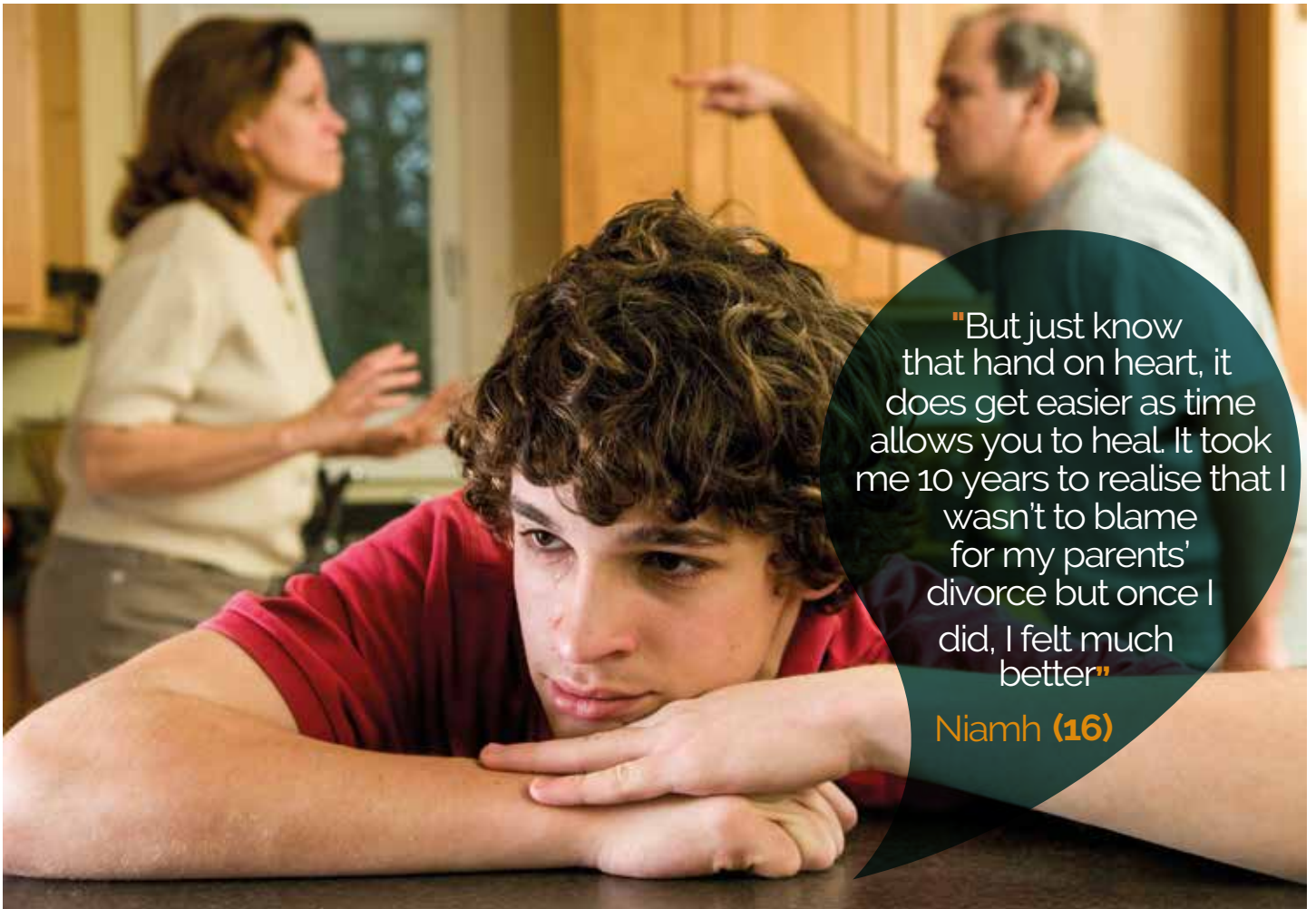
## Be the first to tell them

Don't let them find out from anyone but you as the parents.

"One bit of advice I can give anyone is to sit down as a family. It's hard and really upsetting but it helps once you get through it"

Jade (17)





"But just know that hand on heart, it does get easier as time allows you to heal. It took me 10 years to realise that I wasn't to blame for my parents' divorce but once I did, I felt much better"

Niamh (16)

## Tell them face-to-face

Do not tell them over the telephone, via email or text. Make sure it happens face-to-face.

Be in a comfortable and confidential environment. This can be your home or any other private space where you can have an open conversation. Make sure this intimate discussion is confidential. Do it at a time that is convenient for your teenager. Make sure you are sitting at the same level as them to give them more confidence.

## Keep the boundaries

Decide the boundaries of the conversation in advance and stick to them – for example, details of the relationship with your partner should be out of bounds.

## Give it time

There will be many conversations over time. Allow your teenager to assimilate the enormous messages before ploughing on. They simply won't be able to take it in all at once, particularly if they have not seen this coming.

If your teenager does not want to talk to you, do not panic. It is painful and it will take them some time to understand such a big change. They might find comfort in their peers and friends and try to spend more time with them.

Ensure continuous positive interactions with them and try to engage in activities that you have enjoyed doing together in the past. If they only have very short answers, resist the urge to lecture them – teenagers hate that.

Find help for your teenager and support our work at:

[www.voicesinthemiddle.com](http://www.voicesinthemiddle.com)



# Questions To Ask Your Teenager

It is important to have an active dialogue with your teenager and to spread it over time, because it simply won't be possible for your teenager to take it in all at once. By asking them questions, you will allow them to think in depth about your separation for themselves.

Their voice is just as important as yours. Make sure, however, your questions will not suggest that they should be the ones taking the decisions for you.

Sometimes you won't have answers to their questions. Promise them they will be the first to know when you do.

Asking these questions to your teenager may also be helpful for you and your partner to reflect on and process the practicalities and emotions of your divorce and separation.

## What is important for you right now?

This question shows that you are interested and wish to be more invested in your teenager's life. It will demonstrate that you care about their priorities.

The key to effective communication is active listening. In asking this question, make sure you listen to them, even if you do not receive the answer you expected.

## Do you understand our decision?

In asking this question you will show your teenager that you are willing to open to them about your separation or divorce.

This will help them understand you as individuals better and respect your decision-making.

Be careful when asking this question. Do not reveal unnecessary details to your teenager about your private life as this might create discomfort and confusion. Their well-being should be your priority so do not make them sit through a discussion that they do not want to be part of. Instead, focus on reaching a common agreement with your partner that you will both have the same story to tell.

## How do you feel about us separating?

This question will show that you care about their feelings. If you know that your teenager is a bottler, do not expect them to tell you immediately. Give them time and let them get used to the situation.

### IMPORTANT:

Try to be patient in asking this if they do not want to tell you or they are clearly hiding their feelings. Do not insist they must tell you. Offer them a safe space where they can talk later about it and leave the door open for them to re-visit the subject when they feel like it.

## Do you need some time?

Your teenager may be distracted and show discomfort during the conversation. Let them know that they can have some time and that they have the option to leave if they wish to do so.

If this happens, make sure you are still open to continue the conversation. During this time, try to talk about something else and avoid fighting with them. If time passes and you still have not revisited the conversation, ask them when or if they will be ready for it.

### IMPORTANT:

Make sure that through offering them some space you are not suggesting that time will fix your relationship with your partner.



## Do you need help from someone else?

If your teenager is stressed, they may talk, eat and sleep less, show less interest in what they love, and have more mood swings, be very irritable and/or negative and have aches and pains.

During this time, make home life as calm and pleasant as possible. Arguments are counter-productive and will only stress them more. Make sure your teenager knows that you are interested in what they do and that you will both be proud of them if they do well.

It is important to ask your teenager whether they need additional support as the stress of your divorce or separation combined with the stress of their studies, exams and interviews can be overwhelming.

Your teenager can find support on [www.voicesinthemiddle.com](http://www.voicesinthemiddle.com)

## What do you think will help you during this period?

Providing support for your teenager during this time of change is a priority. They might need space and want to spend more time with friends. Re-assure them that they are your priority and try to provide emotional support for them.

### IMPORTANT:

This question should not suggest that you will give them anything for them to be better. Try to focus on feelings rather than material support. Do not try to overcompensate for your divorce or separation with gifts as this may suggest to your teenager that you are trying to win them over to your side. Instead, ensure that your relationship develops in a positive way.

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## What worries you the most?

Try to be aware of your teen's fears. You will need to know what areas of their life could be affected as a result of your separation or divorce. Remember their worries and try to work a plan with your partner to reduce them. If your partner is not willing to do so, try to work out an achievable plan by yourself or with your family and friends.

## Do you want someone to talk to?

This question will not only show that you are aware that divorce can be difficult to talk about, but it might also prevent any additional distress or anxiety that your teenager might go through without you knowing. It is sometimes easier to communicate with a stranger rather than your family.

Your teenager can find support on [www.voicesinthemiddle.com](http://www.voicesinthemiddle.com)

## Do you have any questions about the legal process?

It may be important to your teenager to understand the legal aspects of your divorce or separation, especially as it is going to affect them as well.

They might want to know how you will divide your finances and property and will certainly want to know where and with whom they will live.

Make sure you have these answers prepared. If you have not planned that yet with your partner, do not give your teenager definite answers, leave the door open for possibilities.

If your children have questions about the legal process you may wish to show them the information on this web page by Woolley & Co Solicitors:

[www.family-lawfirm.co.uk](http://www.family-lawfirm.co.uk)

# Active Listening

“That's one important point for parents to remember: listening affirms that the speaker has something worthwhile to say. Not listening denies or dismisses that value”

Psychology Today

Active listening plays a big part in ensuring that your teenager understands what is happening. By being an active listener, you will demonstrate how valuable their opinion is to you.

When using the questions above, show interest in everything they ask. Do not try to force them to talk, but make sure they are voluntarily taking the lead.

Active listening involves making encouraging and reassuring statements, for example, the following:

- There's nothing that can stop us from loving you.
- You can talk to us. We are here for you. Any question you have, don't be afraid to ask.
- We want to understand and we will keep trying
- If you need to talk to others, that's OK too.



## Top 10 tips for active listening:

- Face the other person and have eye contact
- Listen and watch for non-verbal cues
- Don't interrupt
- Listen without judging or jumping to conclusions
- Don't start planning what to say next
- Show that you are listening
- Don't impose your opinions or solutions
- Stay focussed
- Ask questions
- Reflect and summarise



“I tried to tell my mum how I feel, and then things got better for a while, and then it all starts up again.”  
Anon (15)

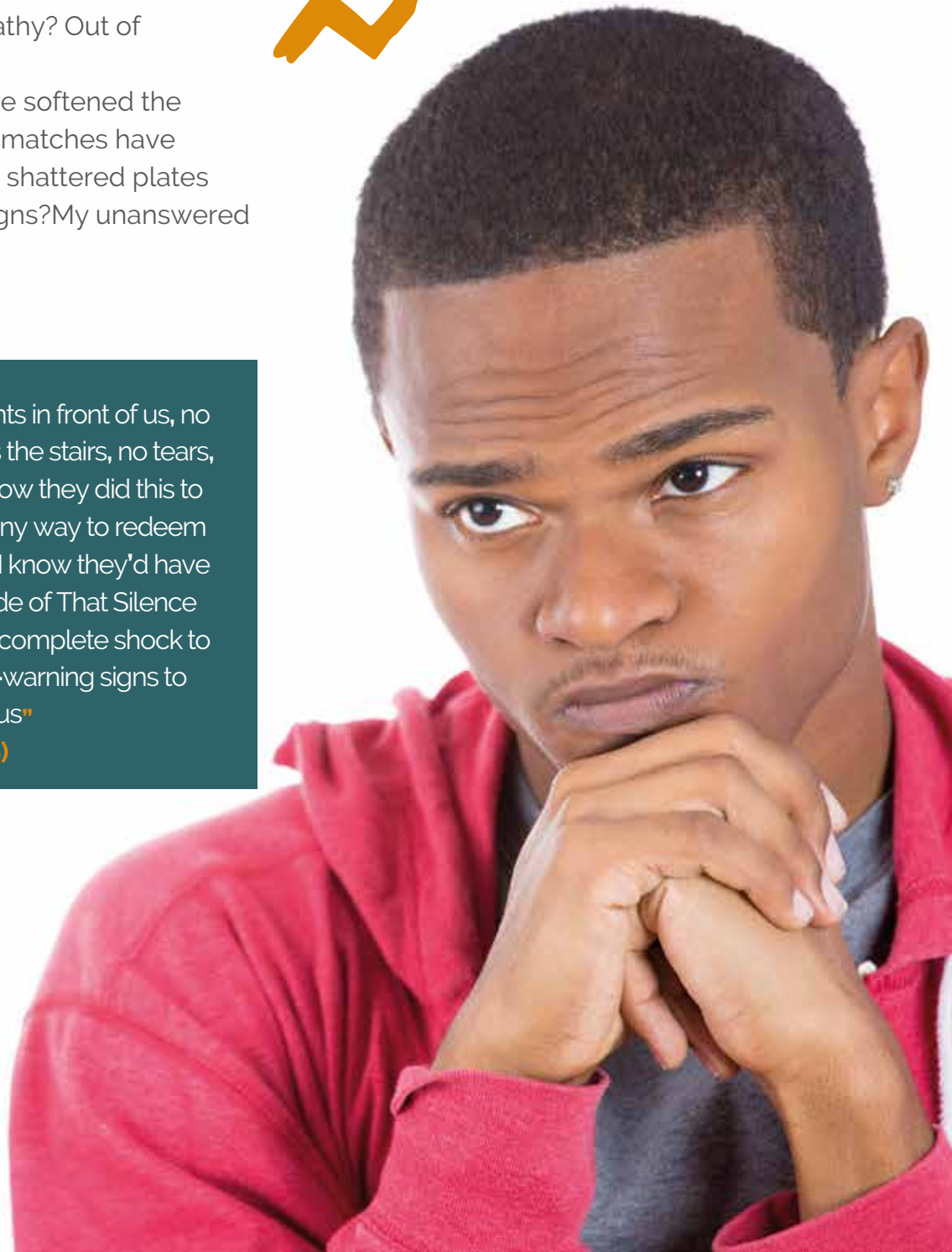
# That Silence

Was it a blessing or a curse?  
That Silence.  
Did it mask the cracks or make them worse?  
That Silence.  
Were the soundless arguments  
Protective? Secretive? Catastrophic?  
Were the avoided conversations  
Out of love? Out of sympathy? Out of  
cowardice? That Silence.  
Would snide remarks have softened the  
surprise? Would shouting matches have  
stopped the tears? Would shattered plates  
have been the warning signs? My unanswered  
questions.  
Because of  
That Silence.



"There were no arguments in front of us, no shouting matches across the stairs, no tears, no slamming doors. I know they did this to protect us. If there was any way to redeem the marriage, our family, I know they'd have wanted to. The downside of That Silence though was that it was a complete shock to us. There were no pre-warning signs to prepare us"

Abi (16)



Find help for your teenager and support our work at:

[www.voicesinthemiddle.com](http://www.voicesinthemiddle.com)

# Help for your Teenager

If you are worried about your teenager's well-being or mental health, there is help available for them directly.

Above all they should talk to someone. At [www.voicesinthemiddle.com/find-help](http://www.voicesinthemiddle.com/find-help) there is advice for your teenager about talking to friends, family, counsellors and GPs.

Your teenager can also gain access to information, a free-phone helpline, online forums, apps to find local services for young people and more on [www.voicesinthemiddle.com](http://www.voicesinthemiddle.com)

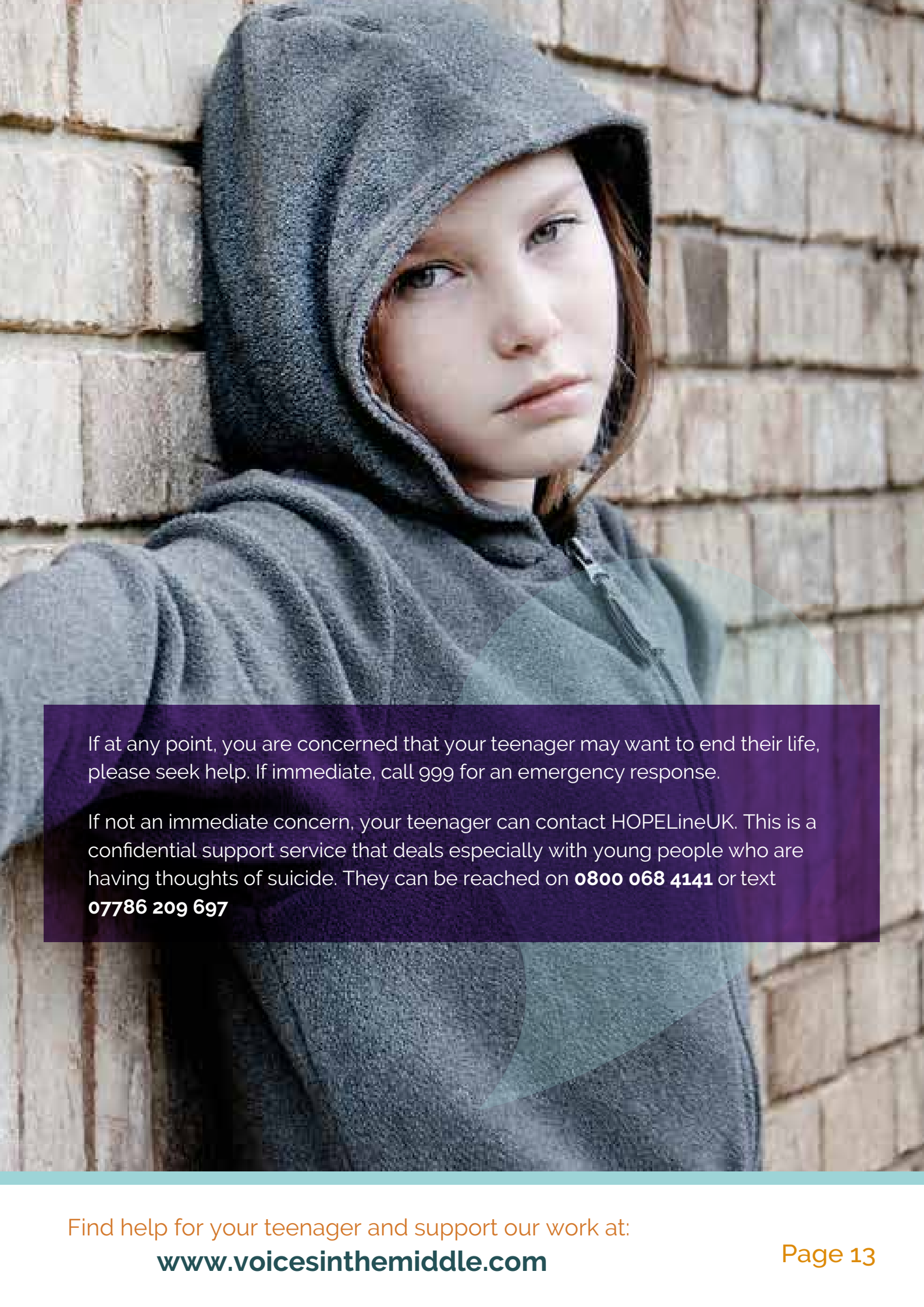
If you have questions about your teenager's behaviour, emotional wellbeing, or mental health condition, you can phone the Young Minds Parents Helpline on 0808 802 5544.

The Young Minds trained advisers are there to give you help and advice as a parent, whatever the question.

It is important to remember that divorce and separation causes anxiety and stress for everyone involved.

You, as parents, may also experience low self esteem and poor well-being. Try to consider all of this during the conversations and process to help protect the mental health of the whole family.





If at any point, you are concerned that your teenager may want to end their life, please seek help. If immediate, call 999 for an emergency response.

If not an immediate concern, your teenager can contact HOPELineUK. This is a confidential support service that deals especially with young people who are having thoughts of suicide. They can be reached on **0800 068 4141** or text

**07786 209 697**

# Further Resources for Parents



**[www.OnlyMums.org](http://www.OnlyMums.org)**

Supporting parents who are looking to make the best decisions for their family during separation and divorce.



**[www.OnlyDads.org](http://www.OnlyDads.org)**

A national on-line support and signposting service for parents who are going through separation or divorce.



**[www.gingerbread.org.uk](http://www.gingerbread.org.uk)**

Supporting single parent families to live happy, secure and fulfilling lives.

**Gingerbread**  
Single parents, equal families



**[www.oneplusone.space](http://www.oneplusone.space)**

OnePlusOne's short course 'Getting it right for children' ([click.clickrelationships.org/content/parenting-apart/course-getting-it-right-for-children](http://click.clickrelationships.org/content/parenting-apart/course-getting-it-right-for-children)) is designed to get parents practising communication and negotiation skills for the sake of their children. Also see additional content about parenting apart at [click.clickrelationships.org/home/parenting-apart](http://click.clickrelationships.org/home/parenting-apart).

 **oneplusone**  
thinking relationships



**[www.sortingoutseparation.org.uk](http://www.sortingoutseparation.org.uk)**

Free online resource for parents and couples dealing with divorce or separation. Part of the Government's Help and Support for Separated Families initiative.

 **Sorting Out Separation**  
Helping you deal with relationship break down



**[www.netmums.com/support/relationships](http://www.netmums.com/support/relationships)**

Offering advice and support to parents on all subjects, including relationship difficulties.



 **www.dad.info**

A national on-line support service and community for fathers, including support for those who are going through separation or divorce.

 **youngminds.org.uk**

[youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/parents-helpline/](http://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/parents-helpline/)  
Call the free helpline for confidential, expert advice if you are worried about your teenager. 0808 802 5544

 **www.naccc.org.uk/kidsstuff**

Keeping children in touch with parents following separation through a network of contact centres. These provide a safe space where children can meet the parents they don't live with. Watch our #lostparents film at [naccc.org.uk](http://naccc.org.uk).

 **www.cafcass.gov.uk**

Cafcass stands for Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service. Cafcass represents children in family court cases in England.

 **www.resolution.org.uk**

Resolution's 6,500 members are family law professionals committed to the constructive resolution of family disputes. Members follow a Code of Practice ([www.resolution.org.uk/code](http://www.resolution.org.uk/code)) that promotes a non-confrontational approach to family problems that consider the needs of the whole family, in particular the best interests of any children.

 **www.samaritans.org**

Samaritans is available round the clock, every single day of the year, for anyone who is struggling to cope. You can call Samaritans for free from any phone on 116 123, email them at [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org) or visit [samaritans.org](http://samaritans.org) to find details of your nearest branch.

 **The Handover Book**

The Handover Book is a unique and simple communication book for separated families. Ashley and Leigh are qualified Psychotherapists, Child and Family Consultants and Family Mediators. They have a wealth of experience when it comes to working with separated families in the public and private sector. This book has been designed to ensure that both parents will always be aware of what is happening in their children's busy lives. It's a way of communicating the important things in a non-blaming, non-critical and constructive way.



Find help for your teenager and support our work at:

**[www.voicesinthemiddle.com](http://www.voicesinthemiddle.com)**

# QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR TEENAGER?

- What is important for you right now?
- How do you feel about us separating?
- Do you need some time?
- Do you need help from someone else?
- What do you think will help you during this period?
- What worries you the most?
- Do you want someone to talk to?
- Do you have any questions about the legal process?





# TOP 10 TIPS FOR ACTIVE LISTENING

1. Face the other person and have eye contact
2. Listen and watch for non verbal cues (communication)
3. Don't Interrupt
4. Listen without judging or jumping to conclusions
5. Don't start planning what to say next
6. Show that you are listening
7. Don't impose your opinions or solutions
8. Stay focussed
9. Ask Questions
10. Reflect and summarise



In this guide, you can read about how to talk to your teenager in the middle of divorce and separation, including how to start a conversation and questions to ask.

This guide has been created by our Voices in the Middle young volunteers with the support of Woolley & Co Solicitors:

**[www.family-lawfirm.co.uk](http://www.family-lawfirm.co.uk)**

Voices in the Middle is a project of The Family Initiative, a UK registered charity (no. 1170660) and a company limited by guarantee (no.10445272):

**[www.familyinitiative.org.uk](http://www.familyinitiative.org.uk)**

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&co solicitors  
family law specialists