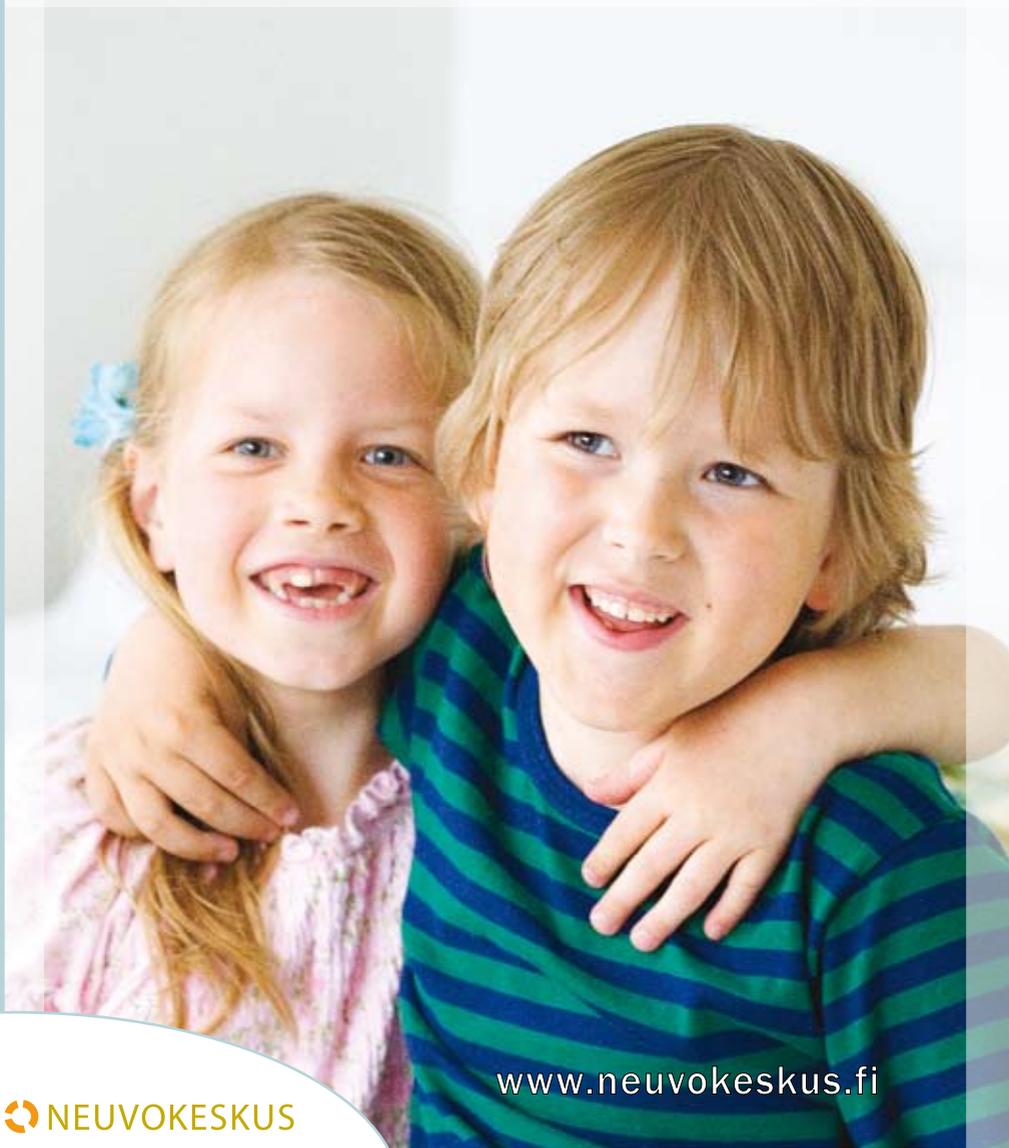


# A PARENT'S GUIDE

INFORMATION AND SUPPORT FOR  
DIVORCING FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN



[www.neuvokeskus.fi](http://www.neuvokeskus.fi)

**A Parent's Guide – Information and Support  
for Divorcing Families with Children**

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 **NEUVOKESKUS**

  
LASTENSUOJELUN  
KESKUSLIITTO



## Dear reader

This guide is intended for those who are considering a divorce, parents who are still processing their divorce, and their friends and relatives. The theme running through this guide is the idea of neverending and continuing parenthood, even after a divorce. The end of a relationship does not mean the end of parenthood. Even after a divorce, the child still has the right to the care and love of both his/her parents. The child has the right to remain a child and to lead a life that is in accordance with his/her age. The parents are responsible not only for the well-being of their child, but also for the quality and development of their relationship with the child after the divorce. After a divorce, parenting becomes - if possible - even more important than before.

The end of a relationship challenges the parents to create a new kind of relationship with one another. Even though your ex-spouse is no longer your companion, to the child he or she is still important and unique as a parent. The parents must take responsibility for the divorce to be able to cooperate and support their child in the new family situation. Processing the emotions arising from the divorce also helps a parent to adapt to the situation and start a new life.

This guide also provides you with tips on where to find help and support for yourself and your family. A select bibliography, focusing on the theme of divorce, can be found at the end of the book.

The first edition of 'A Parent's Guide' was originally compiled as an information package to be handed out to participants in Eroneuvo-service ('Divorce Counsel'). The texts in the third edition were updated in the Neuvo Centre project, which continues the work of the Neuvo project. The third edition is published in Finnish, Swedish and English. We wish to thank Ilkka Mauranen, LL.M., for legal updates to the guide, as well as the Duo project of Familia Club ry for the section discussing divorce and bicultural marriage. We also wish to extend our thanks to the Finnish Slot Machine association for its support.

We hope that 'A Parent's Guide' will prove useful to all those touched by the divorce of a family with children.

Helsinki, May 2011

**Heikki Koiso-Kanttila**

Project Manager

Central Union for Child Welfare/Neuvo Centre



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## TO DIVORCE OR TO REMAIN TOGETHER?

### Thoughts of divorce should always be discussed

It is good if spouses are able to discuss the problems in their relationship. You should not be afraid of discussing even divorce. If spouses do not discuss their expectations and the things they find important in a relationship often enough, a divorce can come as a shock to one of them.

For someone contemplating a divorce, it may seem like the only possible solution to problems in the relationship. Still, contemplating divorce or discussing it does not necessarily have to mean that it is inevitable. Frank discussion does not make a relationship weaker; rather it is the lack of such discussion that does.

It is good to know that the possibility of divorce may have been discussed or contemplated in all relationships – even those that last – at some point.

There are many reasons for contemplating a divorce. You may feel that your emotions have died, or that you no longer have shared dreams with your partner. Everyday life with its working life or unemployment pressures, scarcity of time spent together, the uneven distribution of family responsibilities, and financial worries may all put the relationship to the test. Problems may also be communication-related: the unwillingness to speak, the inability to express your needs or listen to your partner, constant quarrelling and conflicts, or disparaging comments about the spouse may all lead to a situation where both spouses feel that they have become estranged from one another. The relationship is also affected by emotions arising from issues relating to personal growth and development, such as thoughts of the evanescence and uniqueness of life.

Developmental crises in the family are also reflected in the relationship. The birth of the first child may be surprisingly challenging in a relationship. Parenting may take all your time, and there is no time for maintaining the relationship. Finding the right balance between the needs of the child, your own needs, and the needs of the relationship may be problematic.

Substance misuse, mental health problems or violence may also burden the relationship and lead one or both spouses to contemplate divorce. In terms of parenting, you should seek help for such problems, whether you eventually decide to divorce or not.

A person contemplating divorce may feel that a divorce would solve many problems – even ones that a divorce could in reality never solve. For example, a divorce will never remove the parenting-related differences in opinion between the parents. Despite the divorce, the parents still need to remain in contact and be able to compromise on issues relating to the child; after all, they are both still parents even if they are divorced.

It is also good to remember that even though divorce might be a solution to some problems in the family and the relationship, it often brings new problems along with it. Making the decision to divorce is usually one of the most difficult decisions a parent has to face in his or her life. If you are contemplating a divorce, you should look into all other alternatives for finding help before making the final decision.

You can seek support and ideas for improving your family life and relationship even if you are not facing a severe crisis or the threat of divorce. Indeed, you should seek help for relationship problems early on, when both spouses are still sufficiently committed to the relationship and neither of them has taken any definitive steps towards getting a divorce. There is a good chance of making it through even difficult situations as long as both spouses still have the will to continue the relationship.

### Points to ponder:

- What specifically was it that made me think about getting a divorce?
- What are the things in our family life that I would like to see a change in?
- How could I discuss this with my spouse? How would my life change with the divorce? What about the lives of my spouse and children?
- Which problems would a divorce solve and which would it not?
- What kind of new problems might a divorce bring with it?

### Where to find help for relationship problems and divorce issues?

You should seek outside help and support for problems in your relationship and family life when the idea of divorce as a solution to your problems starts to enter your mind regularly, preferably even before that.

You can get outside support for discussing family problems in family mediation, for example. Family mediation is a statutory social welfare service for people contemplating divorce, as well as for divorced parents and their family members. Family mediators are trained professionals (in practice, child welfare supervisors or social workers) who help parents to find solutions to family problems. The aim in family mediation can be, for example, finding a solution that is acceptable to both parents on how the children's affairs are to be arranged after the divorce. The specific purpose of the service is to secure the child's rights and status in the divorce process. Family mediation is voluntary, confidential and free of charge. All Finnish municipalities are obliged to provide this service, and you can ask for an appointment at your social services office.

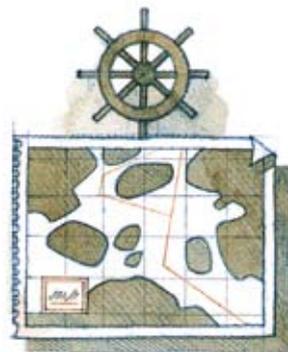
You can also find help for your problems on relationship courses, in family centres, and in family counseling centres. Relationship services are provided by municipalities, parishes, as well as various organisations and private service providers.

- Family counselling offices provide parents with help and support in issues relating to parenting, children's development and family relationships. The services are free of charge. For contact details, see the Web site of the child's municipality of residence.
- Family counseling centres provide support in various relationship and family problems as well in other crises. Typically, people contact a family counseling centre because of relationship conflicts, infidelity, or interaction, parenting, or stepfamily problems. The services are free of charge and church membership is not required. For more information, see [www.evl.fi](http://www.evl.fi)
- The Eroneuvo ('Divorce Counsel') service is for those contemplating divorce, parents who are in the middle of a divorce process, as well as the friends and relatives of divorcing families. The Eroneuvo sessions provide factual information and peer support in divorce-related issues. The sessions are free of charge and no advance enrolment is required. For more information on the times and venues of the sessions, see [www.neuvokeskus.fi](http://www.neuvokeskus.fi)
- The Eroretki.fi ('Divorce Journey') Web application on the Neuvo Centre Web site or at [www.eroretki.fi](http://www.eroretki.fi) is an interactive service where the questions, multiple choice answers and comments encourage you to see the divorce from the child's viewpoint. The application is in Finnish.
- Kataja ry organises relationship courses and Solmuja parisuhteessa ('Knots in the Relationship') courses, which are also suited to couples considering divorce. A course fee is payable. For more information, see [www.katajary.fi](http://www.katajary.fi)

- A nationwide search service for family counseling and relationship therapy can be found on the Family Federation's Toimiva parisuhde ('Functional relationship') Web page at [www.vaestoliitto.fi](http://www.vaestoliitto.fi). The Family Federation also has a national helpline, tel. 0800 183 183 Mon 10am-12am, Tue 6pm-8pm and Thu 12pm-2pm, with Family Federation psychologists receiving calls. The Family Federation's Perheverkko ('Family Network') provides advice in everyday issues for expectant mothers and families with infants. The advisory service is available on the Web, by e-mail at [perheverkko@vaestoliitto.fi](mailto:perheverkko@vaestoliitto.fi), or by telephone. Leave a message and your contact details in the answering machine at 040 180 1500. The Family Federation provides services both free of charge and at a fee.

- The Erosta Elossa ('Survive the Divorce') service of Miessakit ry provides support and guidance for men in dealing with divorce-related problems and how to survive them. The service provides individual discussions and counseling for men, as well as peer support in issues that arise from the threat of a divorce, in the actual divorce process, or after the divorce. The services are free of charge. For more information, see [www.miessakit.fi](http://www.miessakit.fi)

- Sometimes relationship and family problems are the result of illness in the family, such as prolonged depression, personality disorders or mental problems. You can seek information and support for these problems on the Web site of the Finnish Association for Mental Health at [www.mielen-terveysseura.fi](http://www.mielen-terveysseura.fi). The Finnish Association for Mental Health's Family Therapy Centre organises relationship and family therapy services, which are not only for those suffering from mental health problems as the services are available for anyone. The services of the Family Therapy Centre are intended for families in the Uusimaa region and they are free of charge.



- A comprehensive list of private relationship and family therapists is available at [www.terapeutit.fi](http://www.terapeutit.fi). Private relationship therapy is not necessarily expensive as just a few visits, allowing the couple to discuss things in peace, unhurriedly and with the support of a third party, may serve to ease the tension between the spouses. It is advisable to visit the therapist before starting the therapy. This way you get a correct picture of what kind of service you are about to purchase.
- Occupational health care services are also a possible source for information and support in relationship and divorce issues. Many people find it natural to discuss their problems with a familiar occupational health care nurse or doctor. The personnel's obligation to maintain secrecy makes even the most intimate discussions safe for the customer.



## ONCE THE DECISION TO DIVORCE HAS BEEN MADE

### Legal issues involved in a divorce

If you have been living in a marriage, common-law marriage or registered partnership, the decision to divorce brings with it many changes and things to take care of. The social welfare authorities in the children's municipality of residence have a statutory obligation to provide guidance to parents in matters relating to a divorce.

The dissolution of a common-law marriage is carried out through a mutual agreement of the partners, without any official action. If children are involved in a common-law divorce, their affairs must be arranged in the best interests of the children and in accordance with the Child Welfare Act - just as in a marriage.

A written application for the dissolution of marriage is delivered to a district court. The application can be delivered to the district court office in person, by post, or through an authorised agent. The dissolution can be applied for by both parents or just one of them.

Applying for a divorce is a two-stage process, where the first stage consists of the delivery of the divorce application to the district court of your municipality of residence and the six-month reconsideration period that commences then. If the application was submitted by only one of the spouses, the reconsideration period commences once the other spouse has been informed of the divorce application. The court will notify the other spouse in writing. In practice this takes place when the other spouse signs for the letter in the post office and receives a notification of service. The notification can also be served by a district court bailiff. The second stage refers to applying for a final divorce once the reconsideration period has expired. During the reconsideration period the spouses may live either separately or together. The purpose of the reconsideration period is to give the

spouses some time to adapt to the new situation and to make practical arrangements. The legislator's intended purpose is that during the reconsideration period, the spouses also reflect on their decision to divorce. It is possible to use the services of family mediation to support this reflection.

Even though the divorce application has already been submitted to the district court, it is still possible for the spouses to change their minds and not apply for the final divorce. In this case, the divorce application is not renewed and the application is dismissed on procedural grounds. If the spouses still want a divorce after the expiry of the reconsideration period, the application for the final divorce must be submitted to the district court within six months of the expiry of the reconsideration period. If the final divorce is not applied for within the specified time-limit, the divorce application lapses. If the spouses have been living separately for at least two years when applying for a divorce, the divorce is granted without a reconsideration period.

For more information on marriage legislation, applying for a divorce, and the distribution of matrimonial assets, see the following Web sites: the judicial system - [www.oikeus.fi](http://www.oikeus.fi), the Ministry of Justice - [www.om.fi](http://www.om.fi), and the Government Legislation Database - [www.finlex.fi](http://www.finlex.fi). The district court of your municipality of residence will also provide you with additional information.

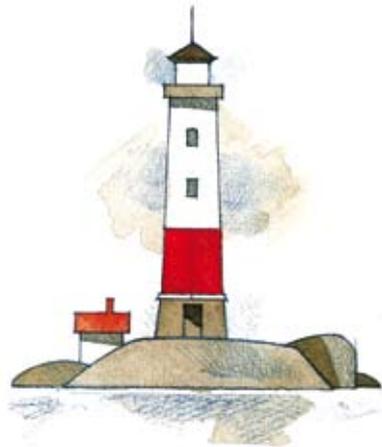
### **One becomes two – reorganisation of finances**

The distribution of assets can be performed either in the first stage of the divorce process or later on. In practice, it is possible to apply for the distribution of assets for a relatively long period of time after the termination of the marriage. The spouses agree on the distribution of assets. The spouses can either draw up a mutual agreement on the distribution, to be signed by two witnesses, or they can draw up an agreement with a lawyer. The distribution of assets is dependent on a marriage settlement (if any). If the spouses have a marriage settlement, a separation of the property will be carried out.

If the spouses fail to reach agreement on the distribution of assets, they can apply to a district court for the appointment of an executor to perform the distribution. The decision of the executor concerning the distribution can be appealed to a district court or, where necessary, to a court of appeal. If the outcome of the distribution would otherwise be unreasonable, it is possible to settle the distribution.

In common-law marriage, the spouses do not have a marital right to the property of the other spouse. The Act on the Dissolution of the Household of Cohabiting Partners became effective in April 2011. It affords protection for the partners upon the dissolution of a common-law marriage. The aim of the new act is to make the distribution of property amassed during the common-law marriage more just, and to provide a method of arbitration if the spouses otherwise fail to reach agreement on the distribution. Like marital spouses, also common-law partners may depart from most of the provisions of the proposed law through a mutual agreement. The law is applicable to common-law partners who have been cohabiting for at least five years, and who have or have had a child or custody of a child.

The provisions are equally applicable to couples of the same or different sexes. The act is also applicable to common-law marriages that started before the act entered into force. On the other hand, the act is not applicable to common-law marriages that ended before the act entered into force (1 April 2011). After the termination of the common-law marriage, a partner may demand separation of the property. The guiding principle in the separation is that both partners keep their



respective properties. However, movables are considered to be owned by both partners, unless it can be established which partner owns a certain object.

A partner is entitled to compensation if he or she has assisted the other partner in amassing his or her property and if the distribution of the property based solely on ownership would result in unjust enrichment at the expense of the other. Compensation is not payable if the disproportion between the contributions of the partners is insignificant. The contribution entitling a partner to compensation can consist of housework done while the other party amassed his or her property in working life. Likewise, significant construction or renovation work or long-term care work at home for the benefit of the other partner may entitle a partner to compensation.

According to the new law, the partners can agree on the separation of the property and compensation on their own. If the partners fail to reach agreement, they can apply to a district court for the appointment of an executor. The executor carries out the separation of property and decides on any compensation payable. A deed of partition is drawn up as evidence of the separation. If the appointment of an executor has not been applied for, the claim for compensation can also be submitted to a district court. The right to receive compensation lapses if it has not been demanded within six months of the separation of property. If the partners do not separate their property, the right to receive compensation lapses three years after the partners moved apart or the death of a partner.

The parent living with a child after the divorce can apply for an increase in child benefit (single parent increase) in Kela (the Social Insurance Institution of Finland). It is also possible to apply for a housing allowance for housing expenses. This financial support is intended for those with a low income, and it can be applied for a rented, right-of-occupancy or owner-occupied home. For more information on increased child benefit, the income limits for housing allowance, and acceptable housing expenses, see the Kela Web site at [www.kela.fi](http://www.kela.fi).

Economic and debt counselling helps private individuals to sort out their financial situation. They provide help and advice in planning household finances, paying off debts and drawing up payment plans. The service is free of charge. For more information, contact the social services office in your municipality of residence. You should reserve an appointment for debt counselling well in advance as it may take several months before you get to see the counsellor.

Subsistence allowance is the last resort when your income and assets are not enough for your living expenses. You can apply for subsistence allowance in the social services office in your municipality of residence.

## **AGREEMENTS SECURING THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD**

In a family with children, the parents have to consider particularly issues relating to the child and parenting at the end of a relationship. For most parents, divorce is the first time they come into contact with the Child Custody and Right of Access Act, 1983:361, which provides on the relationship between children and parents. The duties and responsibilities of custodians and the principles of good child care are defined in the Child Custody and Right of Access Act. The purpose of the act is to secure the child's right to balanced development and welfare as well as to two parents. The law is binding on the parents regardless of their living under one roof or separately. If the parents are married, they have joint custody by default, and they are both responsible for the care, education and maintenance of their children. Common-law partners agree on joint custody at a visit to a child welfare supervisor in conjunction with the confirmation of paternity. Nowadays most parents continue as joint custodians even after the divorce.

The parents draw up a mutual agreement on how the child's affairs will be arranged after the divorce. The agreement defines the form of custody, which parent the child will be registered with, how and when the child will visit the other parent, and how the costs arising from the care of the child are to be divided between the parents. If there is more than one child in the family, each child is considered separately to find the solutions that are in the best interests of each child.

Usually parents have their mutual agreement confirmed by a child welfare supervisor. The confirmation is not obligatory, but an unconfirmed agreement is not as strong legally as an agreement that has been officially confirmed. If the agreement has not been confirmed by a child welfare supervisor, neither parent will be entitled to receive executive assistance to implement the unconfirmed agreement if one of the parents refuses to act according to the agreement at a later stage.

The child welfare supervisor of the child's municipality of residence is, on the basis of his or her official position, obliged to assist parents in drawing up a mutual agreement. Official forms confirmed by the Ministry of Justice are to be used for agreements drawn up at a child welfare supervisor's office. The agreement can also be free-form as there are no provisions in the law with regard to the form of the agreement. The child welfare supervisor makes sure that the agreement is not against the best interests of the child and sends it to the Social Welfare Board for confirmation.

The parents can have a ready-made agreement with them on their visit to the child welfare supervisor. If the parents are unable to reach agreement on how to arrange the child's affairs, it is the child welfare supervisor's duty to help them to reach agreement. It is also possible to receive support from family counselling to reach agreement in the matter. To have an agreement that is satisfactory to both parents and in the best interests of the child, the parents should prepare for their visit to the child welfare supervisor by familiarising themselves

with the issues included in the agreement and discussing them together. Outside help is available for this discussion, see Chapter 'Where to find help for relationship problems and divorce issues?'

### Form of custody

Most parents opt for joint custody for their children. It is important for the child that parents have joint custody. The idea in joint custody is that both parents are still responsible for bringing up and caring for the child, and that they make all important decisions concerning the child together. If parents have joint custody, both parents have the right to access all information relating to the child in day care, school and health care, for example. Joint custody reinforces both parents' legal parenthood, and also gives them the feeling that they are part of their child's life with all the rights and obligations involved in it.

Parents can also opt for a type of joint custody where, unlike in standard joint custody, a court of law decides on the distribution of duties between the custodians. Agreements for this type of custody must always be confirmed by a court of law. A court of law may also appoint other custodians for a child in addition to or instead of the biological parents. In some cases, a grandparent or another relative may act as a secondary custodian.

The term 'single parent' is still used quite often in everyday speech, but the term is something of a misnomer since fewer and fewer parents nowadays opt for sole custody. However, sometimes sole custody may be the only option. The sole custodian of a child is solely responsible for the child and decides on all matters concerning the child. Sole custody does not free either parent of the maintenance responsibility, however. Sole custody as such does not limit the other parent's right of access. The right of access can be quite extensive regardless of the form of custody.

What parents often find problematic is that a parent who sees the child regularly but is not a custodian (sole custody) does not have the right to be automatically informed of matters relating to the child. The fact that they do not have this right can lead to situations which are against the best interests of the child, as e.g. when the child has an illness that affects his or her everyday activities and which the other parent has not been informed of, or if the child falls seriously ill while visiting the other parent and the sole custodian cannot be contacted.

In special cases, a court of law may, however, order authorities to disclose information concerning the child to a parent who is not the custodian of a child in sole custody. The Supreme Court has issued the following preliminary ruling on the matter (2003:7): 'A court of law may issue a ruling according to which a parent who is not a custodian shall have the right to exercise a custodian's right to receive information concerning the child from authorities if this can be considered to be in the best interests of the child' (Child Custody and Right of Access Act, Section 9(3)). In practice, a parent applying for the right to have access to information concerning the child should make it sufficiently clear which particular information concerning the child he or she wishes to have access to.

### **Child's residence and address**

The parents decide together on matters relating to the child's living arrangements after the divorce. The divorce is something that happens in the relationship between parents; the parents divorce one another, but neither of them divorces the child.

The child's official address is entered in the mutual agreement between the parents. At least for the time being, a child can have only one address, even if he or she divides his or her time more or less equally between both parents. The fact which parent the child officially lives with does not have to be significant in terms of the child's welfare if the parents trust one another and the child can flexibly stay with both parents. In financial terms the child's address is still significant, however; child benefit and housing allowance will be paid to the parent the child officially lives with.

Traditionally, the question of which parent the child lives with has been blown out of proportion when deciding on matters concerning the child. If parents are stuck with the issue of the child's address in the early stages of the negotiations, there is a danger of this undermining the parents' willingness to cooperate in the future; furthermore, it is not in the best interests of the child. If the first thing to be decided is who the child will be living with, and only then do the parents agree on the right of access and other details of joint custody, it might be difficult to create a cooperation relationship on an equal basis later on and to make decisions that are in the best interests of the child. No arrangement is good and well-functioning as long as the parents are incapable of trusting one another or support one another as parents.

### Right of access

In the Child Custody and Right of Access Act, the obsolescent term of 'visitation rights' is used to describe the child's need and right to maintain regular contact with a parent living in another address. Instead of visitation rights, we should find another term to describe this to emphasise the fact that usually the child is more than willing to visit the other parent. Where in the past the visits usually occurred every second weekend within a two-week period, nowadays the tendency is fortunately to make the visitation and living arrangements more flexible.

The child has the right to remain in contact with the parent he or she is not living with and spend time with him or her (= right of access) regardless of whether the parent is the child's legal custodian or not. In addition to regular visits, contact can also be maintained via telephone, text and e-mail messages, and letters. Being able to remain in contact with the other parent between visits will significantly ease the child's longing. However, it is important to remember that it is not up to the child to maintain contact and arrange visits. This is always the responsibility of the parents.

When agreeing on visitation times, the child's age, school rhythm, day care, and regular hobbies should be taken into account. It is also useful to specify clearly holiday and public holiday arrangements, as well as the child's and his/her relatives' and friends' birthdays and other special days in the visitation agreement. Many other factors affect the visitation arrangements, such as the parents' working hours (shift work or irregular hours etc.), distances between the parents, visitation expenses, the parents' financial circumstances, and new family relationships. It is also good to bear in mind that even detailed visitation agreements do not work in practice if both parents are not flexible where necessary or do not have a sincere will to maintain a relationship with the child.

The actual decisions concerning the child are always made by the parents, so they also carry the responsibility for the consequences of their decisions. It is not always easy for the child to express his/her hopes and wishes in terms of living or visitation arrangements, for example. It is particularly difficult for the child if he/she knows that his/her parents do not agree on matters concerning the child. The child wants to remain loyal to both parents and not contradict either of them. If the parents trust one another and are able to negotiate, it is also easier for the child to express his/her views and hopes. Then the child knows that nobody will get angry at him/her or abandon him/her for speaking his/her mind. The child should not be forced to express his/her opinion under any circumstances. The child may not even have a clear opinion; instead he/she trusts that the parents are able to solve matters together in his/her best interests.

It is good to remember that regardless of their age, all children have the statutory right to be heard in matters concerning themselves. Hearing the child means taking into account both the child's hopes and opinions and his/her developmental needs.

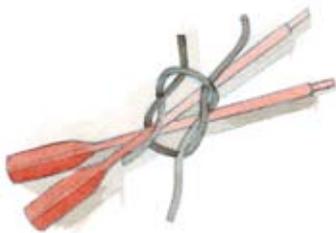
## Child support

The child has the right to sufficient maintenance, and according to the law, both parents are responsible for the maintenance in proportion to their income. When determining the parents' ability to pay child support, the points to take into account include the parents' ability to work, their income, assets, other maintenance liabilities, and the housing expenses of the parent who will pay child support. When determining the parents' maintenance responsibilities, the points to be taken into account include the child's need for maintenance, the child's ability to be responsible for his/her own maintenance, as well as the factors that do not cause the parents any costs or which are minor.

The amount or payment method of child support may be changed if there is an essential change in the need for maintenance or the parents' ability to pay child support, or if the child is able to support him- or herself before reaching maturity. On certain conditions, child support can also be paid directly to the child when he/she has reached adolescence.

Parents are responsible for the child's school expenses even after the child has reached maturity if this is found to be reasonable. Together with their adolescent child, the parents can also have an agreement on education support drawn up on a visit to a child welfare supervisor.

The amount of child support must be reasonable with regard to the circumstances of both the child and the parent paying support. The maintenance liability is not dependent on whether the child is in joint or sole custody. According to Finnish law, a parent's new spouse is not obliged to support his/her spouse's child. To facilitate the calculation of child support and to make it more uniform, the Ministry of Justice has published instructions for the payment of child support. See the Ministry of Justice Web site ([www.om.fi](http://www.om.fi)) for these instructions.



Child support is intended to cover the expenses arising from the care of the child. Traditionally, the parent visiting the child has paid child support to the parent living with the child. However, if the child spends a lot of time with both parents, the child in practice has two homes and causes costs for both parents. If the parents' incomes are more or less equal, and there is no significant difference in their ability to pay child support, it would seem reasonable that neither pays child support to the other. The parents can also agree that the costs for any major purchases are split evenly.

If one of the parents fails to pay child support as agreed or as ordered by a court, the child can be paid so-called maintenance support by the The Social Insurance Institution of Finland. Maintenance support is not money given away; instead, it accumulates maintenance debt for the parent liable to pay child support. The existence of a confirmed and valid maintenance agreement is a necessary precondition for receiving maintenance support.

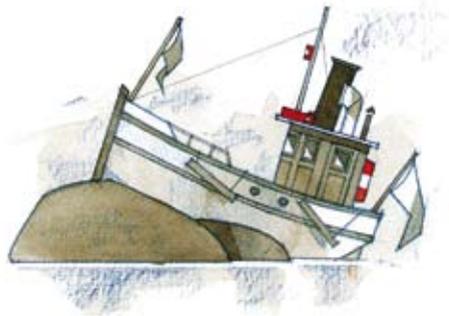
### **See you in court after all?**

The purpose of the Child Custody and Right of Access Act is that the parents are able to negotiate on matters concerning the child's maintenance, visitation rights and living arrangements in the best interests of the child. If parents fail to reach agreement in these matters, they can apply to a district court for a decision. Before resolving the case, a district court usually requests the social welfare authorities in the child's municipality of residence for a so-called report on the parents' circumstances.

According to the Legal Aid Act, a parent with a small income can receive free legal aid for court hearings. On certain conditions, insurance companies can also be partially responsible for litigation expenses, provided that the person in question has a legal expenses insurance as part of his/her household insurance policy.

Before taking the matter to court, the parents should seriously consider if there are still any other options. A custody dispute may be extremely harmful for the child. Constant litigation is also expensive. Taking the matter to court cannot guarantee agreements that work if the parents do not commit themselves to these. However, sometimes taking a custody and visitation dispute to court is the only way to try to secure the child's right to his/her parents.

Parents should try family mediation before taking the matter to court. An alternative to litigation is court mediation, which either or both parents may request. It is possible to apply for court mediation both before the trial as well as during the legal process. A court of law can also refer the parents to court mediation. In court mediation, the purpose is to find a solution to the contested matter that is in the best interests of the child and also satisfactory to both parents. Court mediation is an option if both parents are willing to try it. In court mediation, each parent is responsible only for his/her costs, and they may employ a legal adviser or an expert on child matters, jointly appointed and paid for by both parents. A district court judge acts as an arbitrator. For more information on court mediation, contact the district court in your municipality of residence, or visit the Ministry of Justice Web site at [www.om.fi](http://www.om.fi).

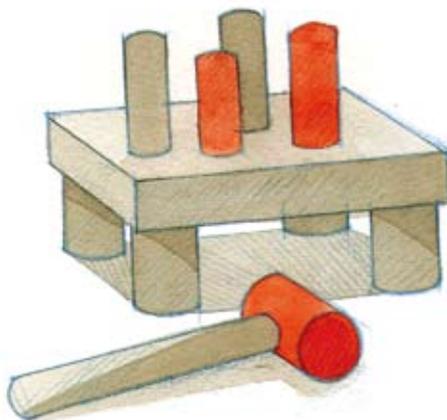


## Relevant legislation

The following laws provide on divorces in families with children and the status of children in the divorce:

- Marriage Act 1929:234
- Child Maintenance Act 1975:704
- Child Custody and Right of Access Act 1983:361
- Act on the Implementation of a Decision Concerning Child Custody and Right of Access 1996:619
- Child Maintenance Act 1998:671
- Child Benefit Act 1992:796
- Child Welfare Act 2007:417
- Act on the Dissolution of the Household of Cohabiting Partners 2011:26

These acts can be found (English translations available for some of them) in the Government Legislation Database at [www.finlex.fi](http://www.finlex.fi), or follow the instructions on the Ministry of Justice Web site at [www.om.fi](http://www.om.fi)



## DEALING WITH DIVORCE

### The art and agony of divorce

At its best, a relationship is based on mutual affection and trust. A relationship is loaded with various expectations concerning intimacy, security, acceptance and love. Divorce and the breakdown of a relationship brings with it a wide range of emotions, such as feelings of having been let down, insecurity, the agony of losing someone you love, hopelessness, grief, and anger. The divorcee is often afraid of the future: 'How will I make it financially?' or 'Will I be on my own for the rest of my life?' Often the children are also a source of anxiety. How will the children react when we tell them about the divorce? How will the divorce affect their future? How will I be able to maintain contact with my child when we no longer live under the same roof?

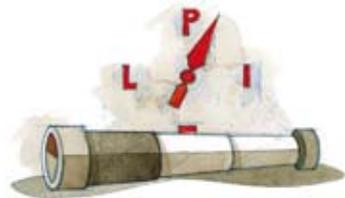
Dreams of a shared future are shattered in a divorce. Divorce is particularly hard on the spouse who did not want it. We often start to question the meaning of life when we feel we have been deserted and rejected in our most important relationship. All kinds of questions run through our heads. Why did this happen to me? What have I done wrong? Could I have done something differently? Guilt for the decision to divorce or the choices that led to divorce, disappointment with yourself or the relationship, as well as grief over the end of the relationship are some of the feelings that both spouses have to go through.

Every person goes through a divorce in their own way. The spouses may feel quite differently about the divorce. One of them might be relieved, while the other may be full of anxiety.

How the divorce relates to your previous life experiences also has a bearing on how you experience the divorce and recover from it. Childhood experiences, the divorce of your parents, and your own previous divorces may all resurface in this process. In addition to the reasons that led to the divorce, these are all affected to a great extent by the way the divorce is handled.

Divorce is often characterised by the fact that the spouses' processes do not proceed at the same pace. It is quite common for the spouse who initiated the divorce to have been considering divorce for a long time and also to have dealt with the emotions connected with it to some degree. He or she may have started to make practical arrangements for the divorce even before the spouses started to discuss the possibility of divorce. In a situation like this, the other spouse feels he or she has been taken by surprise. Many problems are caused by the fact that the divorce process does not proceed at the same pace for the spouses. Therefore it is crucial that the spouses discuss the possibility of a divorce as early as possible. This allows the spouses to deal with the divorce on more or less an equal footing when it becomes reality. This would also be ideal in terms of the spouses' cooperation in the future.

A divorce does not affect only the divorcing spouses; instead, it is also a traumatic event for the children and the close relatives of the family. For the children's sake it is crucial to share the responsibilities of parenting and maintain relations with close relatives and other people who are close and special to the children. Usually grandparents and other close relatives have to go through some of the same emotions as the spouses. All too often friends and relatives make the mistake of imposing their own opinions and ideas on divorce on the spouses, denigrating the other spouse, taking the role of a referee, or trying to blame someone for what happened. The best way for a friend or relative to support a divorcee is by listening, comforting and just being there for him or her. It is easier to discuss the divorce and analyse the events more clearly with someone you can trust. Offering to mind the children is an example of the kind of concrete support that divorcing parents expect from their friends and relatives.



## Divorce as a crisis

Divorce can be seen as a crisis starting with the contemplation of divorce and ending in the recovery process. In the early stages of the divorce crisis, people often try to deny what is happening because it seems too frightening and unbearable. At some point, however, the divorcee has to try to face the painful reality of the divorce. This stage is often characterised by feelings of grief and anger. We all have our own ways to alleviate painful emotions. Many divorcees protect themselves by creating a distorted picture of the reality. A divorcee may blame the ex-partner for his/her own misery and for everything that has happened. Another may take the blame for everything. At this stage of the divorce crisis, many people become depressed, suffer from sleeping and concentration problems, or lose their appetite.

Each divorce has its own reasons and backgrounds, but the emotions the divorcees go through in the process are often the same. Having lost the spouse who was an essential part of his or her life, the divorcee is suddenly faced with loneliness.

Even if the divorce was not his or her decision and he or she did not want it, it is in the best interests of the divorcee to try to face the reality of the divorce and to find comfort in the belief that life will go on. Through acceptance it is possible to focus on the future and start building a new life after the divorce. Your damaged self-esteem will be restored little by little, and surviving such a crisis may even boost your self-confidence. Having dealt with the crisis you can learn to understand better not only yourself but other people as well.

However, a divorce crisis does not always automatically move in the right direction; sometimes divorcees get caught up in a web of anger and bitterness. The divorce can become a serious threat to an individual's well-being if he or she refuses or is not able to face the emotions arising from the divorce and deal with them. If a divorcee does not manage to work his or her way

through the process it may manifest itself in constant bitterness towards the ex-spouse, who is seen as solely responsible for the divorcee's ill-being and the difficulties he or she faces in life after the divorce. A person who is stuck with his or her divorce crisis may repeat the same pattern in his or her next relationship, or become isolated and avoid relationships because of the fear of failure in another relationship.

We may face numerous crises in the course of our lives, both natural developmental crises and acute, unexpected crises. A divorce may force us to view our choices and values from another perspective, to reflect on what we actually want from our lives and a relationship. Our earlier experiences and what we considered self-evident may reveal themselves to us in a different light.

### **Recovering from divorce**

The time it takes to recover from divorce varies with the individual. It is comforting to realise that every divorcee has skills and knowledge which will help him or her to survive the crisis. Our previous life experiences, individual resources, difficulties and crises we have overcome, as well as our personal ways of coping will all help us on our way towards a new life after a divorce. Usually we adapt to changes with time.

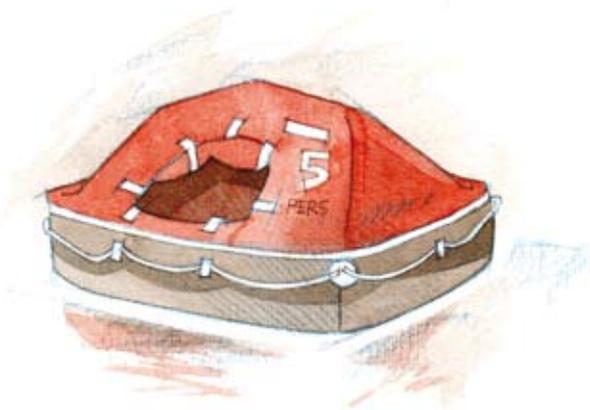
The first sign of recovery may be the ability to focus on the future. You know that you have made it through your crisis when you have accepted the divorce as part of your personal history. You can now look back on the divorce as just one phase in your life.

It is extremely important for a divorcee to process the divorce to be able to let go of the relationship and ex-spouse and look to the future instead. Letting go of your ex-spouse on an emotional level is also important in terms of the creation of a healthy parent-child relationship. Parental cooperation that is in the best

interests of the child will not be possible until the emotions that were on the surface in the break-up stage no longer affect or tinge the interaction between parents.

**Points to ponder:**

- Which stage am I in in my own divorce process?
  - how about my ex-spouse?
- Which things could help me move on in my divorce process?



## SUPPORT IN PROCESSING A DIVORCE

### Information and peer support

An Eroneuvo ('Divorce Counsel') session is a once-only service developed in the Neuvo project for those contemplating divorce, parents who are in the middle of a divorce process, as well as the friends and relatives of divorcing families. The Eroneuvo sessions provide factual information and peer support in divorce-related issues. For more information on the times and venues of the sessions, see [www.neuvokeskus.fi](http://www.neuvokeskus.fi).

Parent's Council peer support group is another service developed in the Neuvo project. Parent's Council is intended for fathers and mothers who have made the decision to divorce or have already divorced. The group aims to support parenting and parents' cooperation in matters relating to the child after the divorce. The group also tries to help parents to see things from the child's viewpoint in the divorce. The group is led by a professional. The group has eight meetings. For times and venues of Parent's Council meetings, see [www.neuvokeskus.fi](http://www.neuvokeskus.fi).

Divorce seminars and divorce groups also provide peer support for divorcees. In a divorce group you meet other people in the same situation. Their experiences can help you to understand things better and get new insights into your own situation. The support and information you get in the group can turn even a difficult divorce into an experience that will provide support for coping with the divorce process and growing as a person. Divorce groups are organised by parishes, family counseling centres, family centres, NGOs, community colleges, and private divorce group instructors.



**Use the following links  
to find the divorce group that suits you best:**

- Joint divorce groups of Neuvo Centre and Kalliola Community College in Helsinki, tel. (09) 7701 2310, [opisto@kalliola.fi](mailto:opisto@kalliola.fi) or [www.neuvokeskus.fi](http://www.neuvokeskus.fi)
- Services provided by Finnish Evangelical Lutheran parishes and family mediation centres [www.evl.fi](http://www.evl.fi)
- Divorce groups organised by the Family Federation's Family Clinic in Helsinki [www.vaestoliitto.fi](http://www.vaestoliitto.fi)
- Finnish Pensioners' Association's 'Erosta eheäksi' ('Healing after a Divorce') courses, tel. (09) 7257 1177 or [www.elakeliitto.fi](http://www.elakeliitto.fi)
- Miessakit divorce groups for men [www.miessakit.fi](http://www.miessakit.fi)
- Finnish White Ribbon Union divorce groups [www.suomenvalkonauhaliitto.fi](http://www.suomenvalkonauhaliitto.fi)
- Fisher's divorce seminars [www.mervijamatti.fi](http://www.mervijamatti.fi)
- Divorce groups for Science and Art students Nyty ry [www.nyty.fi](http://www.nyty.fi)
- Divorce groups on the Web [www.eroperhe.net](http://www.eroperhe.net)

**Information and peer support online**

The Internet provides an opportunity to read and ask anonymously about things that are on your mind regardless of where you live and what time of the day it is. Finnish Web links:

- Neuvo Centre's webpage provides a list of useful links on divorce issues. Additionally, at [www.eroretki.fi](http://www.eroretki.fi) you can test your thoughts on divorce, parenting skills and the child's viewpoint.
- [www.eroperhe.net](http://www.eroperhe.net) provides a discussion forum for divorcees and those contemplating divorce. You can participate in open and closed discussion forums.

- [www.apua.info](http://www.apua.info) is a comprehensive link and information site maintained by various social welfare and health care organisations. The site provides views and tips on how to survive life's problems, as well as an opportunity to read articles or discuss with people who share your experiences.
- [www.tukinet.fi](http://www.tukinet.fi) provides a directory for help and support services, discussion groups and the Net Support service.
- Nyyti ry runs an ask and answer service intended for students: Virtuaaliolkapää ('Virtual Shoulder') [www.nyyti.fi](http://www.nyyti.fi)
- [www.infopankki.fi](http://www.infopankki.fi) is aimed at immigrants. The site provides basic information on Finnish society and the available services (e.g. marriage, divorce and family problems). The information is available in several languages.
- Discussion site [www.tukiasema.net](http://www.tukiasema.net) provides factual information and assistance for various situations, such as issues relating to relationships, families and children. The site also has links and information on helplines maintained by various organisations.
- [www.verkkoklinikka.fi](http://www.verkkoklinikka.fi) provides various discussion groups on e.g. life crises, being a single parent, and relationships.
- The 'Toimiva parisuhde' ('Healthy Relationship') link at [www.vaestoliitto.fi](http://www.vaestoliitto.fi) (Web site of the Family Federation) provides information on relationship crises, children and divorce.
- The National Helpline of the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church also runs an online help service at [www.palvelevanetti.fi](http://www.palvelevanetti.fi).

## Helplines

Divorce often creates a need to talk about it, and a divorcee may long for somebody to talk to. The divorcee's friends and family often act as listeners, but not everybody wants to talk about their divorce with people who are close to them. This is where the helplines maintained by various operators may provide you with a discussion partner.

Here are the contact details of some Finnish helplines. The hours and possible extra fees vary. A comprehensive list of helplines is also available at [www.tukiasema.net](http://www.tukiasema.net) -> Apua!. The site also lists rates and hours of operation.

- The Finnish Association for Mental Health runs a national helpline, tel. 010195202.
- The Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church maintains a national helpline tel. 01019-0071 (in Finnish) and tel. 01019-0072 (in Swedish). Area codes according to numbering areas.



## PAYING ATTENTION TO THE NEEDS OF THE CHILD

For the child, a divorce can be a frightening, sad, confusing, enraging, or sometimes even a relieving experience. Just like his/her parents, the child has to go through a wide range of emotions and changes. However, the child does not have any preconception of how the divorce will affect his/her life. The child may grieve over one of the parents moving away and be afraid of losing him/her forever. At the same time, the child is afraid of what is going to happen to him/her. Will the remaining parent also go away, and who is going to look after him/her then? The child may be angry and enraged at the parent who moved away from home and left him/her, or at the parent who the child thinks is to blame for the divorce. The child may also feel immensely helpless when he/she realises that he/she cannot affect the parents' decision to divorce even though he/she wants to.

Each child has his/her own way of coping with divorce. This is to a large extent affected by what the situation in the family was like before the divorce. Was the life of the family and the child's emotional environment harmonious and supportive of growth, or were there a lot of arguments and other things that stressed the child? The child's reaction also depends on his/her age, various individual factors, what his/her relationship to his/her parents was like, and the support provided by other adults close to the child.

The child's perception of the divorce is particularly affected by how the parents handle the divorce in practice, what their relationship after the divorce turns out to be like, and to what extent the parents manage to keep the child's best interests in mind when making decisions relating to the divorce.

## How to tell the child about the divorce?

The child's reaction to the divorce is also affected by how the parents talk about it with the child and how well he/she has been prepared for the divorce. The child should be aware of any changes in the family situation, especially the ones that concern him/her.

However, the child should not be needlessly burdened with the parents' relationship problems or discussions on divorce. The child should be told about the divorce only when the parents are sure they know what they are doing. From the child's viewpoint, the divorce usually becomes reality when one of the parents moves away from the family home or the child moves to a new home with one of his/her parents. Once the decision to divorce has been made and the time for separation approaches, it is important that both parents have an opportunity to spend some time with the child, talk to him/her and answer his/her questions. It is very important to prepare the child for the divorce and separation. In an ideal situation, the parents tell the child together about the imminent divorce. Even if the decision to divorce was not made together, telling the child about it together gives the child a feeling of his/her parents still being able to take responsibility together and look after him/her.

What the child is told about the divorce and how is dependent on his/her age. For a small child it is enough to know that his/her father and mother will no longer be living together but they both will look after him/her and spend a lot of time with him/her. If the child is older, he/she has a better understanding of grown-ups' problems, and the parents can tell him/her that they have decided to move apart because they think it is best for everybody and there will be fewer arguments, for example.

The parents should talk openly and honestly to the child about the divorce. This way the child will not have to create the explanations in his/her mind. However, the parents should remember that the relationship is none of the child's business. It is particularly important to make it very clear to the child that the divorce

is not his/her fault; the decision was made by the parents and they will also carry the responsibility for it. The reasons behind the divorce should not be discussed too openly or in detail with the child as this might weaken the other parent's authority in the eyes of the child. For the sake of the child, it is wiser to look for the reasons that led to the divorce in circumstances rather than people.

In the divorce process it is very important that both parents show the child in words and deeds that they both still love him/her. The child must be allowed to love both parents, and this is also something that should be said aloud. The child may be afraid of being abandoned by the parent who is moving away. Therefore it is essential to convince the child of the fact that both parents will definitely remain a part of his/her life. This promise can be made more believable and concrete to the child - and also to adults - by being more specific about its meaning. Like, for example, telling the child that the parent will still support the child in a certain hobby or in doing homework, or that the holiday trip planned for the next summer will not be cancelled. The child needs to be told many times about the new arrangements and changes in everyday routines because things can be too complicated and new for the child to really understand them. For the child, a divorce is a new situation which he/she has no way of comprehending until time passes and post-divorce life settles into its routines.

There is no point in trying to tell the child that nothing will change or that life will go on as before. The initiator of the divorce may be inclined to downplay the negative aspects of the divorce and the loss the child is facing. The fact is, however, that a divorce may be the solution to the parents' problems but it is seldom that for the child. A parent should not make the child any promises he/she will not be able to keep. Seeing the distress and grief of the child may be such an agonising experience for a parent that he/she may be tempted to make promises that he/she knows are impossible to keep. The child may also foster the hope of seeing his/her parents reunited some day. It will help the child to adapt to the new situation if the parents do not maintain or reinforce false hopes.

Just like an adult, a child also needs time and support to deal with the emotions arising from the divorce. An adult can encourage the child to express his/her feelings and experiences by talking about them with him/her. The child does not necessarily want to or know how to talk about the divorce like his/her parents; often the child needs more time to process things. This is nothing to worry about as long as the child seems to be doing well otherwise. The child's reflections and questions come at their own pace and in different situations. Sometimes the child may show his/her feelings only after it has been a long time since the divorce and the child senses that the parents are strong enough to be responsive to his/her feelings. The parents may not realise that the child's behaviour is in fact his/her reaction to the divorce. The parents should be aware of the fact that children want to talk about the divorce over and over again, and that they may keep asking about the same things. The child is supported by familiar everyday routines and the parents having an interest in the everyday events in his/her life, the child's joys and sorrows. Old, familiar toys and objects also create a feeling of security for the child. The child needs his/her parents to give him/her emotional support in the form of love, tenderness and acceptance.

The child must not become a witness to arguments between his/her parents or a bone of contention between them. If a parent disparages and negates the ex-spouse in the presence of the child, he/she is also disparaging a parent that the child loves. Even in the difficult stages of the divorce, the parents should remember that the child does not feel the same way about his/her father or mother as either of the parents. The child's needs are neglected and his/her positive development is undermined if a parent tries to ally him- or herself with the child against the other parent, or if the right of access is used as a means of extortion against the other parent. It is crucial to protect the child's impartiality and loyalty. Talking about the divorce matter-of-factly helps the child to remain a neutral party in the divorce process. The child loves both his/her parents by nature and wants to remain loyal to both of them. A divorce does not give the parents the right to neglect the child's other

basic needs either. For the child, sufficient rest and sleep, getting enough to eat, and everyday routines are the necessary prerequisites for growth and development and an important part of the practical love and caring shown by a parent toward his/her child.

The child's behaviour in day care or at school may change as a result of the divorce. Therefore, it is very important for the parents to notify the teachers or nurses and other grown-ups in the child's life well in advance of the changes that are about to take place in the family. This will help these adults to better understand the changes in the child's behaviour and to support the child for their own part, and the child will not have to inform other people of what is happening in the family.

If you are worried about how your child is dealing and coping with the divorce, ask your family centre for help. They will also provide you with information on any children's groups in the area where the child could talk about the divorce confidentially.

### **Cooperative parenting – what is it made of?**

It takes a lot of effort, many discussions, and flexibility for the parents to make post-divorce joint custody and parental cooperation work. Cooperative parenting is not necessarily easy - or always very nice for that matter. It is in the best interests of the child, however, and it protects the child from the losses and negative effects of a divorce.

The parents should be willing to learn to cooperate with each other in matters relating to the child. Parents who engage in cooperative parenting build a cooperative relationship that is good for their child and works well in their situation. They understand the significance and value to the child of the other parent, and try to support and protect this relationship within their resources. Where necessary, the parents negotiate, trying to find the best solutions for the child and commit themselves to

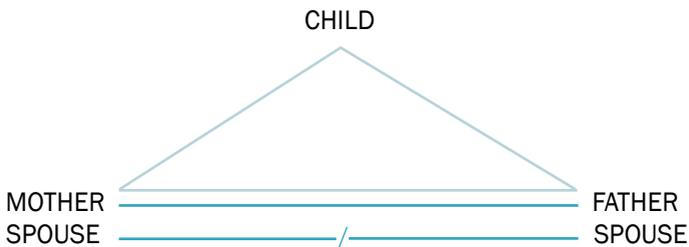
these. The parents do not hide from each other things relating to the child or act behind each other's backs. They know that the other parent is loyal in matters relating to the child. Mutual appreciation and respect will help the parents to keep working for the good of their child.

It is not always easy to look in the mirror. Still, it would be in the best interests of everyone if the divorcees could see their own motives and actions also through each other's eyes. It is always a good policy to treat the other person the way you would like to be treated yourself. For the child, what is crucial about the divorce is not the divorce itself; what matters instead is the way the parents handle the divorce, as well as what the child's life will be like and what kind of relationship the parents manage to build with one another after the divorce.

How well the child copes with the changes brought about by the divorce is crucially dependent on how well the parents manage to solve their conflicts. If the parents take a positive attitude toward one another as parents and cooperate in matters relating to the child, it will help the child to maintain a close relationship with both parents even though they live apart. If the parents find it difficult to cooperate and they fight for the child, it is very likely to be stressful for the child and cause serious conflicts. Therefore, it is vital that both parents seek help as early as possible for the cooperation problems they cannot resolve together.

### "Irreversible triangle"

A relationship can end – parenthood cannot.



## Divorce and a bicultural marriage

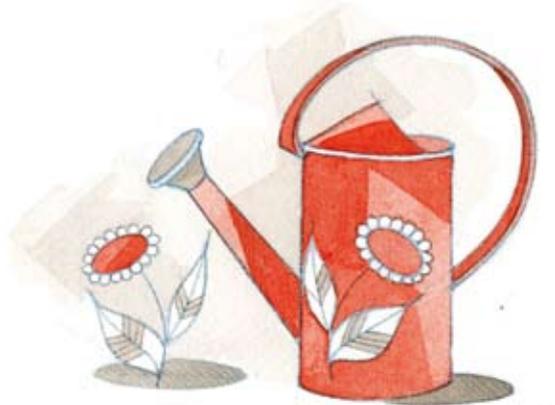
In a divorce, a bicultural family, or a family where the parents come from different countries, faces the same issues, emotions and experiences as a family where the parents share the same native country and the same cultural background. A bicultural divorce does have certain distinguishing features, however, such as the parents' choice of which country to live in, custody of the child, and supporting the child's bilingual and bicultural identity after the divorce.

In a divorce, a bicultural family will possibly face questions like: Which country's legislation will be applied to the divorce? Where can a parent with a foreign background find information on divorce practices in Finland? Will both parents remain in Finland? What to do in a situation where one of the parents returns to his/her native country or moves to a third country? How can the development of the child's bilingual and bicultural identity be secured in a situation where the parents no longer live together?

When bilingual parents end up in divorce, culture may become a scapegoat that the parents use as a weapon in their disputes. This kind of situation places the child in a conflicting position as what the parents are fighting about is an important and inalienable part of the child's self-image. The child finds the situation very confusing, and in the worst case the parents' disputes lead to a situation where the child is ashamed of and insecure about his/her cultural background. This is why the parents should try to see the situation through the child's eyes and accept the fact that the divorce will not change the fact that the child's roots extend to two countries, and that there are still two equally valuable sides to the child's identity. The parents also need to avoid denigrating each other in the presence of the child, and the child should never have to take sides between his/her parents or their respective cultures at the request of his/her father or mother.

The parents' cultures should be present in the child's life in a natural and positive way even after the divorce because such positive experiences will help the child to deal with the painful experiences that a divorce inevitably brings with it. In an ideal situation, the parents also aim to secure the child's right to develop and maintain the native language of both his/her parents; language, after all, is the key to understanding your culture and your roots. Being bilingual will support the child's identity and open up windows to the worlds of both parents. It also creates favourable circumstances for close relations with grandparents and other relatives. When divorcing, the parents should consider the linguistic environment of the family and what kinds of opportunities it affords for supporting the child's bilingual identity in the form of foreign-language day care centres, playschools, schools, friends, relatives, books and films, for example.

Interaction skills, flexibility and respect are necessary for a functional bicultural marriage, and it is exactly these same skills that are necessary also when the couple ends up in divorce. Despite the divorce, the parents still have a child and they are both responsible for bringing him/her up and ensuring his/her healthy development. In an ideal situation, the parents endow the child with both a bilingual identity and a strong and positive bicultural identity.



**Advice and support for bicultural divorce families can be found at:**



- Duo project for bicultural couples and families, [www.familiacub.fi/duo](http://www.familiacub.fi/duo)
- Neuvo Centre, [www.neuvokeskus.fi](http://www.neuvokeskus.fi)
- Central Union for Child Welfare, [www.lskl.fi](http://www.lskl.fi)
- Single Parents' Association, [www.pienperhe.fi](http://www.pienperhe.fi)
- Pääkaupunkiseudun yksin- ja yhteishuoltajat ('Sole and Joint Custodians in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area'), [www.paksy.net](http://www.paksy.net)
- Finnish Association for Abducted Children, [www.kaapatutlapset.fi](http://www.kaapatutlapset.fi)
- Miessakit, [www.miessakit.fi](http://www.miessakit.fi)
- Family Federation's Centre for Multicultural Expertise, [www.vaestoliitto.fi/monikulttuurisuus/monikulttuurinen-osaamiskeskus](http://www.vaestoliitto.fi/monikulttuurisuus/monikulttuurinen-osaamiskeskus)
- Mannerheim League for Child Welfare, [www.mll.fi](http://www.mll.fi)
- Elatusvelvollisten liitto ry ('Union of Parents Liable to Pay Child Support'), [www.elatusvelvolliset.fi](http://www.elatusvelvolliset.fi)
- Eriparivanhemmat ry ('Single Parent Families'), [www.eriparivanhemmat.fi](http://www.eriparivanhemmat.fi)
- Yhden Vanhemman Perheiden Liitto ry ('Union of Single Parent Families'), [www.yvpl.fi](http://www.yvpl.fi)
- Hyvä Erovanhemmuus ry ('Good Parenting Despite a Divorce'), [www.hyvaerovanhemmuus.fi](http://www.hyvaerovanhemmuus.fi)
- Suomen Kasvatus- ja perheneuvontaliitto. [www.suomenkasper.fi](http://www.suomenkasper.fi)
- Eroperhe.net ('divorcefamily.net'), [www.eroperhe.net](http://www.eroperhe.net)
- Apua.info ('Help.info'), [www.apua.info](http://www.apua.info)
- Suomen mielenterveysseura (The Finnish Association for Mental Health), [www.suomenmielenterveysseura.fi/en](http://www.suomenmielenterveysseura.fi/en)

## SUPPORT FOR PARENTING

There are many kinds of services and activities available for divorced parents that provide help and support for parenting, help divorcees make new friends, and provide them with meaningful activities. Here is an outline of the various possibilities.

The municipal home-help service for families with children is intended for families with children in need of temporary child care help or imperative residential care. The availability of the home-help service varies from municipality to municipality according to the needs of children and adolescents and the resources available. Ask your local social services office for this service.

Municipal early-support social advisory services for children with families refers to activities that aim to identify, prevent and alleviate the problems of children, adolescents and families as early on as possible. Utilising the resources of the family, the aim is to promote the family's coping in everyday life and the balanced development of children through discussions, guidance and shared activities. Ask your local social services office for this service.

Several NGOs also provide various services and activities. Some of the organisations also engage in interest representation activities. For more information, see the Web site of each operator. The following list was compiled on the basis of the associations' Web sites.

- The Eroneuvo ('Divorce Counsel') service is for parents contemplating divorce, parents who are in the middle of a divorce process, as well as the friends and relatives of divorcing families. The Eroneuvo sessions provide factual information and peer support in divorce-related issues. The sessions are free of charge and no advance enrolment is required. For more information, see [www.neuvokeskus.fi](http://www.neuvokeskus.fi)

- Vanhemman neuvo ('Parent's Council') peer support groups provide divorcees with an opportunity to share their post-divorce parenting experiences with other people in the same situation. The group focuses on issues like interaction skills and post-divorce changes and challenges in parenting. The group is led by a professional and it meets eight times. For more information, see [www.neuvokeskus.fi](http://www.neuvokeskus.fi)

- Hyvä erovanhemmuus ('Good Parenting Despite a Divorce') association aims to promote the well-being of divorce children and the cooperation between divorced parents and their new partners for the good of the child and for the realisation of the rights of the child even after the end of a relationship, as well as to generate more public discussion on good post-divorce parenting without unnecessary conflicts between the parents, their partners, or men and women in general. E-mail: [info@hyvaerovanhemmuus.fi](mailto:info@hyvaerovanhemmuus.fi)

- Local associations of the Yhden vanhemman perheiden liitto ('Union of Single Parent Families') maintain so-called Single Parents' Living Rooms all around Finland.. The association also engages in support person and peer support activities and arranges divorce seminars and leisure activities. The Eroinfo ('Divorce Information') helpline answers questions concerning child support, maintenance and living arrangements of the child, and right of access. The association publishes a magazine, the Muuttuva Perhe ('The Changing Family'). For more information, see [www.yvpl.fi](http://www.yvpl.fi)

- Elatusvelvollisten liitto ('Union of Parents Liable to Pay Child Support') aims to promote the child's right to maintain good relations with both his/her parents. The union runs a national toll-free legal helpline and has member associations and events all over Finland. The association publishes a magazine, the Elatusvelvollinen – uusperheellinen. For more information, see [www.elatusvelvolliset.fi](http://www.elatusvelvolliset.fi)

- Suomen Uusperheellisten Liitto ('Association of Stepfamilies in Finland') acts as a cooperation forum for stepfamilies and organises peer support group and vacation activities. The association publishes a magazine, the Supliikki. For more information, see [www.supli.fi](http://www.supli.fi)

- Miessakit ry aims to support the mental, psychological and social growth of men, to promote interaction and family life in Finnish families, and to enhance gender equality among men. The aim is to develop the structures of shared responsibility and mutual assistance that aim to realise these goals. Among its activities are male networks, events for men, father groups, men's divorce groups, and the Lyömätön linja ('Unbeatable line') telephone service. For more information, see [www.miessakit.fi](http://www.miessakit.fi)

- Pienperheyhdistys ('Single Parents' Association') organises peer support groups, outings, camps and Tenavatupa ('Kids' Place') activities for its member families. The association also provides trained male friends and support persons for the children of single parent families, as well as so-called step-grandpa and step-grandma activities in Helsinki. For more information, see [www.pienperhe.fi](http://www.pienperhe.fi)

- Mannerheim League for Child Welfare organises family café and hobby club activities for families with children. The league also runs an e-mail service and a Children's and Adolescents' Helpline (tel. 116 111) that children can call when they want to discuss something that is on their mind. The Parents' Helpline (tel. 0600 12277) and the Parents' Web provide support for parenting issues. The Web site contains information on the development and care of children, tips for everyday situations, and a discussion forum. Parents' questions are answered by trained volunteers. For more information, see [www.mll.fi](http://www.mll.fi)



## Child care help and holiday support

In a divorce process, people are often faced with situations where they need child care help. In addition to friends and relatives, various NGOs also provide professional, fee-paying child care. You can also ask the authorities in your municipality of residence for temporary child care help.

The Mannerheim League for Child Welfare provides short-term, temporary child care for children with families at all times of the day, including weekends. The family orders the service themselves and pays the childminder directly. For contact details of national service points, see [www.mll.fi/perheille](http://www.mll.fi/perheille).

- The Family Federation provides child care help in the Helsinki metropolitan area. The childminders are independent grown-ups who have been trained for their duties. An employer can also enter into agreement with the Family Federation on care for employees' sick children. For more information, see [www.vaestoliitto.fi/lastenhoitotoiminta](http://www.vaestoliitto.fi/lastenhoitotoiminta).
- Save the Children Finland provides support person and support family services [www.pelastakalapset.fi](http://www.pelastakalapset.fi).

A divorced family is often in dire straits financially. It is possible to apply for support for family holidays and leisure activities on social and financial grounds. Supported holidays for families with children are organised by the following organisations:

- Lomakotisäätiö ('Holiday Home Association')  
[www.lomakotisaatio.com](http://www.lomakotisaatio.com)
- Lomakotien Liitto ry ('Union of Holiday Homes')  
[www.lomakotien-liitto.fi](http://www.lomakotien-liitto.fi)
- Lomayhtymä ry ('Holiday Union')  
[www.lomayhtyma.fi](http://www.lomayhtyma.fi)
- Huoltoliitto ry ('Maintenance Union')  
[www.huoltoliitto.fi](http://www.huoltoliitto.fi)
- Parasta lapsille ry ('Best for Children')  
[www.parastalapsille.fi](http://www.parastalapsille.fi)

## Points to ponder: As parents, are we ready for the following things after the divorce?

1. We will find the best solutions and arrangements for our child together. We do not divorce the child, we divorce each other and a relationship that does not work.
2. Once we have made the decision to divorce, we will tell the child about it together. We will make sure that the child will not have to come up with an explanation for the divorce him- or herself, or feel guilty about the parents' decision to divorce.
3. We will show the child that we love him/her and will take care of him/her even though we are divorcing. We will be responsive to the child's emotions and listen to the child.
4. We will tell the child what kind of changes the divorce will bring with it and which things will remain the same in his/her life. Together, we will make every effort to reinforce the child's feeling of security.
5. We will protect the child from unnecessary disappointments. We will not make empty promises that we will not be able to keep, or raise the child's hopes in vain for things that are out of our control.
6. We understand and accept the fact that it is important for the child to be able to remain in contact with both parents as well as grandparents and other people that are important to him/her. As parents, we will try to make it possible for these relationships to remain unchanged.
7. We will tell the other adults in the child's life about the divorce. The child will not have to bear responsibility for telling other people about the new situation.
8. We will both do our best to remain on speaking terms. It is not the child's duty to act as a messenger between the parents.
9. We will take care of our own resources and seek help where necessary. It is not the child's duty to act as a support person for either parent or as a balancing factor in the emotional atmosphere of the family.
10. We will bear in mind that despite the divorce, the child has the right to lead a life that is in accordance with his/her age. We realise that parents can have an impact on what the child's life will be like.

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## Vocabulary:

Child Custody and Right of Access Act =  
Laki lapsen huollosta ja tapaamisoikeudesta

Child Welfare Act = Lastensuojelulaki

Child support = Elatustuki

Child welfare supervisor = Lastenvalvoja

Common-law marriage = Avoliitto

Family counselling office = Perheneuvola

Family counselling centre = Perheasiain neuvottelukeskus

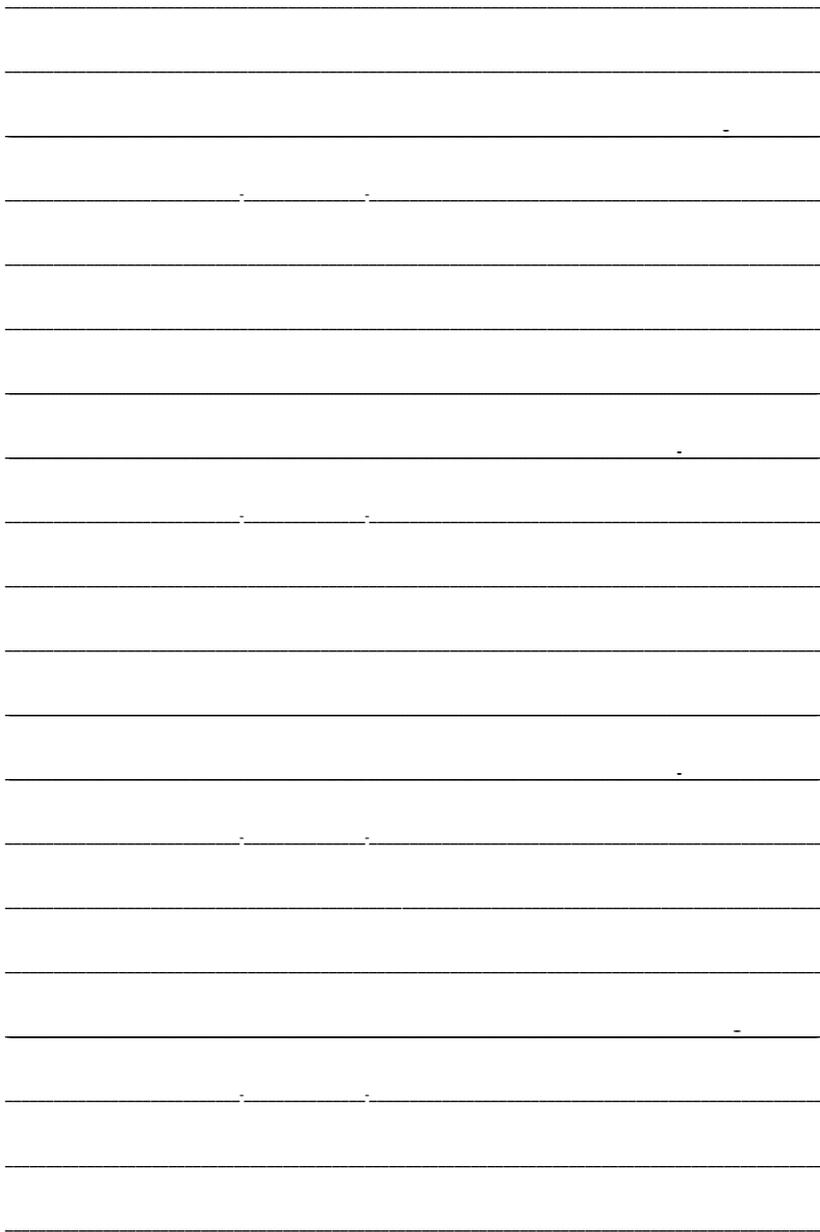
Family mediation = Perheasioiden sovittelu

Joint custody = Yhteishuoltajuus

Sole custody = Yksinhuolto

Kela = The Social Insurance Institution of Finland





## NEUVO CENTRE: SUPPORT FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY

The Helsinki-based Neuvo Centre provides versatile peer support services for divorce families and stepfamilies. The Neuvo Centre trains social welfare and health care professionals to provide Eroneuvo and Vanhemman Neuvo services elsewhere in Finland as well. Additionally, the Neuvo Centre publishes reports, professional literature, and 'A Parent's Guide'. The activities are supported by the Finnish Slot Machine Association.

### **Eroneuvo: Information and support for divorce**

The Eroneuvo service is intended for parents who are either considering divorce or who have already divorced, as well as their close relatives. Eroneuvo also provides information on divorce-related issues. In addition to a professional, there are always voluntary peer support providers present. The services are free of charge and no advance enrolment is required.

### **Vanhemman neuvo: Guidance and peer support for parenting issues**

The Vanhemman Neuvo ('Parent's Council') is a peer support group that helps parents in post-divorce parenting issues. The group is led by a professional and it meets eight times. Depending on the organiser, some of the groups are fee-paying, while others are free of charge.

### **Divorce group: Peer support for the dissolution of a relationship and dealing with divorce**

Divorce groups are intended for those who are in the middle of a divorce as well as those who have already divorced. Led by a professional, divorce groups provide information, support and guidance in going through a divorce. Divorce groups meet ten times and are fee-paying. Advance enrolment.

### **Support for children and adolescents**

In Taikuri ('Magician') groups children can process their parents' divorce in accordance with their age with the help of games. The aim is to free the child of any divorce-related feelings of shame, as well as to prevent the child from feeling somehow different or retiring from the company of others as a result.

Vetskari ('Zipper') groups allow adolescents to process the emotions and thoughts arising from a divorce safely and on neutral ground. The divorce is processed through various activities and discussions. Both Taikuri and Vetskari groups are fee-paying and advance enrolment is required.

### **Peer support group for stepfamily couples**

The stepfamily couples' group focuses on stepfamily issues and ways of coping. Peer support groups are arranged both on weekends and as a group that meets eight times. The group is free of charge. Registration in advance.

### **Neuvo Centre citizens' activities and voluntary work**

Neuvo Centre organises theme nights, lectures and discussions on divorce-related topics, as well as outings and family events for families with children. The Neuvo Centre also trains volunteers for divorce family activities.

For more information on the services: [www.neuvokeskus.fi](http://www.neuvokeskus.fi)