

Separation in your School

A Guide to Improving the Experience
and Outcomes for Children



Why parental separation matters in our school

Every year, an estimated 280,000 children experience family separation. In 2021, there were 2.3 million separated families in the UK, with 3.6 million children and almost half of children are growing up outside the traditional nuclear family ([Family Solutions Group, 2023](#)).

Parental separation doesn't have to mean poor outcomes for children, but the way that the separation is handled matters.

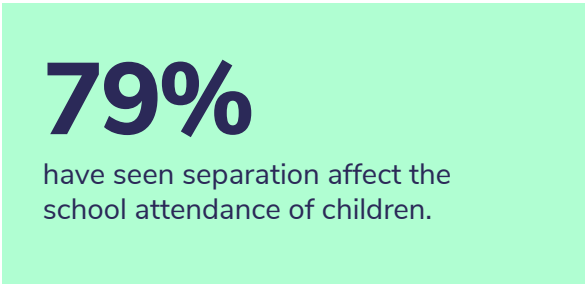
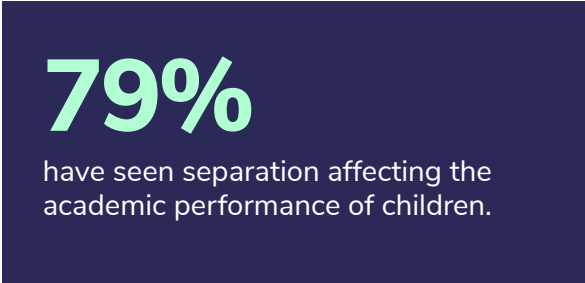
If we had a blank sheet of paper and were designing a package of support for a child whose parents are separating, that child's school would of course play a fundamental role in that plan.

That's why in 2025 we asked teachers across the UK what they are seeing on the ground when it comes to working with separated parents and outcomes for children. Here's what we found:



My teacher was really nice. She asked me how I was and said I could talk to her any time. I felt better because she was there for me and she wasn't really stressed about it all. She was really nice to my mum and dad too"

JAMALA, 9



Data from The Parents' Promise Separation and Education, survey for educational professionals, 2025



School was a refuge for me during that time of my life. I could escape the problems at home and I had a wonderful form tutor I could confide in and share my worries."

IMOGEN, NOW 22

A similarly concerning picture emerges in national statistics about children's mental health.

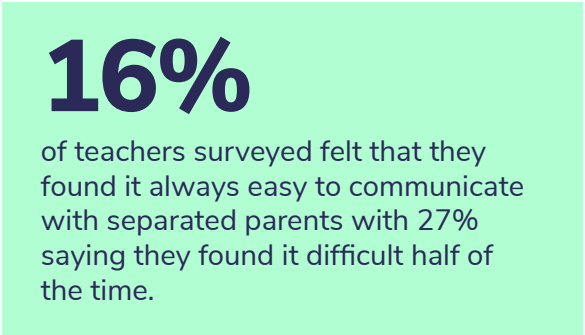
- Fegans report that nearly 1 in 5 (18%) children and young people were referred to counselling due to parental separation or difficulties in home relationships.
- 'Ongoing family tensions' is one of the most common presenting issues in primary-age children who are referred for Place2Be's one-to-one counselling (57%) (2025).

These data show that dealing with separation is a real safeguarding issue and with this information, we began thinking about what schools need in order to provide the best possible support for the children in their care. We also recognise that parents may need support to better understand how they separate is so important to the wellbeing of, and outcomes for, their children.

The Help that Schools Now Get to Support Children of Separated Parents

Teachers seem to agree that with the right training and resources, schools can be a crucial source of support and stability for children when their parents separate. However, they can also be the location or subject of conflict between parents, putting school staff in difficult positions.

The survey also highlighted some of the many problems that school professionals see:



Teachers reported challenging experiences in school relating to parental separation:

61%

of teachers have experienced one parent trying to exclude the other from school communication.

20%

of teachers have experienced one parent trying to exclude the other, or members of their ex-partner’s family from picking up a child from school.

37%

reported being in situations of such high conflict between the parents that school is forced into a time consuming and stressful intermediary role.

Our survey also revealed that:

Only 38%

of teachers were aware if their school had a policy for separated parents and only 8% had a safeguarding lead that dealt with separation.

Less than 11%

of teachers have had any training to understand children’s needs and rights in the context of separation.

Fewer than 6%

have had any training on the legal aspects of children’s rights and needs in any family separation.

This resource is designed to help

As part of this initiative, we have created a one-page document for schools called ‘Working Together When Families Change’ which is a suggested approach for supporting children with separated families to help ensure that the right frameworks are in place at a school.

More detailed guide separation policies are available online, and we have a link to an example one alongside our resources on our website. DfE online guidance is [here](#).

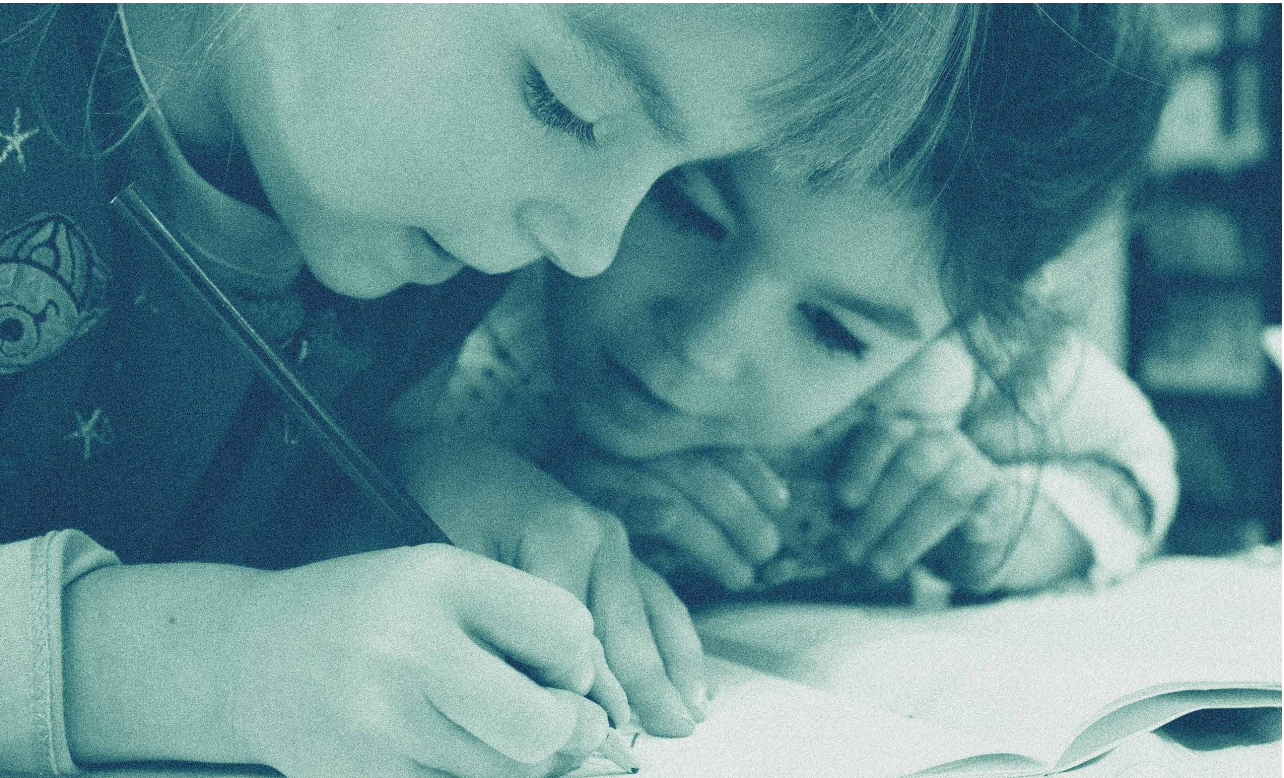
We have also produced a more-detailed resources list for primary and secondary schools and a guide for parents so that they can understand their responsibility towards the child and the school during a separation. All these resources can be found at [The Parents’ Promise](#).

This resource is intended to be a quick guide you can rely on when supporting a child in your school who is experiencing parental separation.

It’s designed to help you make good decisions and put in place important boundaries, reducing stress for you and leading to better outcomes for children in your school.

This guide is divided into three sections: **Emotional, Practical** and **Legal**.

Within each section you’ll find key knowledge, together with a checklist you might want to refer to.



Emotional

Key Knowledge

Parental separation is an adverse childhood experience. This means that children of separated parents are at higher risk for academic, social, and emotional problems.

The more stressful the circumstances faced by children – i.e. the more stressors they face and the fewer resources they have to help them – the greater the likelihood of behavioural, emotional, social, and academic problems.

Examples of stressors that relate to poorer outcomes are as follows:

- Children live with a parent who has poor psychological health or uses ineffective parenting strategies.
- Children lose contact with a parent.
- Children are exposed to high levels of conflict between their parents.
- Poor co-operative parenting behaviour.
- The household income significantly declines.

Children who face fewer disruptions or stressors, like those in the list above, are more likely to adjust quickly to separation with minimal long-term consequences.

As a separation unfolds, children and parents will face different sources of stress at different points (during the marriage or partnership; during the breakdown of the relationship; as the divorce or separation occurs and through post-separation co-parenting) and they might have varying coping skills and support available to them at different points.

Schools will usually be the first to pick up any signs of stress or difficulty for a child. The way in which schools offer support can therefore be very

timely and provide positive impact for a child. In our 'Five to Thrive' guide we outline the key areas of hobbies and extracurricular activities, friendship groups, schoolwork and attendance, mental health and the importance of transparent and joined-up communication between both parents and the school.

Checklist

- Look out for changes in behaviour that might indicate changes at home.
- Establish an open dialogue with the parents as early as possible. It can be helpful to make it clear that parental separation is common, your school sees it all the time and there is no judgement.
- Work with the child – and the parents, if appropriate – to identify a trusted adult for that child within the school who they can speak to if they feel like it.
- Tell the child – and their parents, if appropriate – what other sources of support are available within the school, including any school therapist.
- Signpost children to age-appropriate resources. See our resource guide for suggestions.

Practical

Key Knowledge

The law in England and Wales reflects research evidence, which is that children benefit from having close nurturing relationships with both their parents. There's a presumption in law that it is in the child's interests to have relationships with both their parents, unless there's a risk of harm. Any risk of harm needs to be objectively assessed by independent professionals.

School is a vital, neutral space for children. There is an opportunity for teachers to support both parents to be involved in their child's life by ensuring neither parent is excluded from their child's school life. Your school should have a separation policy to ensure that separation is handled in the best way for all to create the conditions for every child with separated parents to thrive. If your school doesn't have one then our separation policy template is available. We also recommend that your school should have a dedicated member of staff or pastoral support staff to whom children can turn to if they wish.

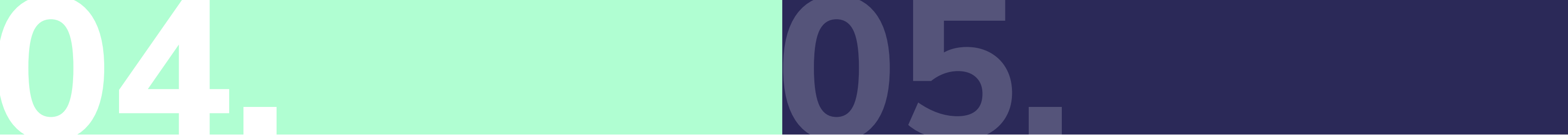
Checklist

- Check that both parents are on the correct mailing lists to receive all emails (and any other correspondence) about their child. It's quite common for a non-resident parent to be left off, which can mean they miss out on receiving key information about their child at school.
- Update home addresses and other contact details for both parents.
- Ensure the administrative system notes that both parents should be contacted in the event of an emergency (unless otherwise explicitly agreed in writing by both parents).
- Remind parents to update the PTA if they maintain a separate database of contact information for families at the school.
- Consider a policy for separated parents to include whether separate parent consultations are offered as default.
- Ensure teachers and other staff in your school have had training on the language that is used to talk about parental separation.



When my parents separated it was such a difficult time for me, the conflict seemed to be everywhere, school included. There was no safe space and I felt I had no-one to turn to.”

WILLIAM, NOW 24



From a practical perspective, the language that is used to talk about parental separation is important. That’s because it can have an impact on how parents feel about school, and how children feel about their circumstances. Here are some examples.

Instead of	Think...	Why it Matters...
Dispute	Issue/problem to be resolved.	Using more solutions-focused language can be helpful for parents, and their children.
Contact	A child’s time with a parent/ ‘time with mum’ and ‘time with dad’.	‘Access’ or ‘contact’ is too impersonal. We’re talking about the precious time that a child has with a parent. Children need time with parents, whether they’re together or apart.
Non-resident parent	[Child’s name] lives mostly with mum/dad/grandparents etc.	Confusing and exclusionary language, some people assume on first encountering the phrase, that it implies that the parent referred to does not live in the UK.
Handover	Changeover day.	Handover suggests ownership and control, almost as if the child is a possession.
Custody	Parental responsibility and child arrangements.	‘Custody’ suggests ownership and control. It was removed by the Children Act 1989. The law gives parents ‘parental responsibility’ for their child and expects them to make arrangements centred around their child’s needs.
Single Parent	Separated parent (unless widowed). Parent raising [child’s name] alone / solo parent / one-parent family (if the other parent is no longer living or is estranged).	‘Single parent’ can carry negative connotations, implying a deficit or disadvantage. Also single parent is very often the wrong descriptor, the child still has two parents who love them and co-parent together.
50/50, equal care	Shared care, joint parenting, shared responsibility.	This isn’t about parents asserting their ‘right’ to a percentage of the child’s time. It’s about arrangements which enable a child to develop an equally close and nurturing relationship with both parents
Family breakdown, broken family, broken home	Family in transition. Change in family structure/ dynamic.	‘Broken’ implies a judgement and is unhelpful.
Warring parents/ custody battle	Family in crisis.	Continued conflict puts a child at risk of harm. Any family in crisis needs tailored support to help them agree arrangements and parent more cooperatively.

Legal

England and Wales only

Key Knowledge

Parental responsibility (‘PR’) is the term used to describe the legal rights and responsibilities that relate to the parenting of a child.

If someone has PR for a child, they’re responsible for making the decisions that are best for that child. Routine decisions can be made by the parent who is with the child at the time but for the “big ticket” decisions – for example, where they are educated, whether they should receive medical treatment and which country they should live in – the decision must be made jointly and agreed by everyone who has PR.

Parental Responsibility

Here’s an explanation about who has PR for a child.

- If a mother gives birth to a child, they automatically have PR.
- A biological father has PR for the child if at least one of the following are true:
 - he is married to or in a civil partnership with the child’s mother at the time of the child’s birth.
 - he marries or enters a civil partnership with the mother after the child’s birth.
 - he is listed on the child’s birth certificate as being the father.

The spouse or civil partner of a parent who has given birth to a child conceived through IVF at a licensed fertility clinic will automatically have PR for the child unless they don’t consent to the treatment.

It’s also possible for a parent to get PR through a formal PR agreement, a PR Order from the court or adoption.

If a child was born to a surrogate, the parents will have acquired PR through a parental order or adoption.

Step Parents

A step parent will not get PR when they marry the child’s mother or father. They can acquire it by entering into an PR Agreement with all those holding PR or by applying to the Court for an Order granting them PR.

Parents do not lose PR if they divorce. The responsibility to financially maintain a biological child is separate from PR.

Court Orders

In an ideal world there would be no need for court orders and separating parents would be able to agree a parenting plan together, or with the help of other professionals.

It costs money to use professionals to get help when parents can’t agree on arrangements, so many parents go to the Family Court as it’s the least expensive option. It’s not that the issue between them is about law, so much that they need someone in authority to make a decision for them, when they’re stuck. An order can be made about when children should spend time with each parent. Ideally each parent would be flexible around the order but this is often not the case. It’s important to state that just because a court is involved it doesn’t mean that either parent is bad, or dangerous, they are just unable to agree on when they should each spend time with their children.

Checklist

As our survey revealed, and your own experience may validate, separating parents can often put schools and teachers in a difficult situation through disagreement and false information.

This is a checklist you can refer to when faced with a difficult situation.

Situation	Checklist
One parent excluding the other from communication with the school	<div><div></div> Are both parents on the school database and contact details up to date? If only one parent is on the database it's worth enquiring as to why.</div> <div><div></div> Is there a court order restricting communication with both parents? This is quite rare and in the majority of cases both parents should have free and equal access to school communication so check this first and don't just take a parent's word for it.</div> <div><div></div> Have both parents been reminded of any other channels of communication from the school/school community (e.g. class WhatsApp groups, PTA mailing lists, school apps) and have instructions provided for joining those channels?</div>
One parent excluding the other from school events	<div><div></div> Is there a court order restricting one parent attending school or being within a specified distance from the other parent or child (e.g. a 'non-molestation order')? Ask for evidence before making any decisions.</div> <div><div></div> Have both parents been invited to the school events?</div> <div><div></div> If there are concerns about parents' joint attendance at school events, have arrangements been made to allow parents to sit separately and/or attend separately? (For example, separate parent consultation appointments.)</div>
Conflict between parents on school premises	<div><div></div> Is there a court order restricting one parent attending school or being within a specified distance from the other parent or child (e.g. a 'non-molestation order')? Ask for evidence before making any decisions.</div> <div><div></div> Is there a court order that specifies when the child is to spend time with each parent? If so, can the parents adhere to the order so they are not at the school at the same time?</div> <div><div></div> In general a parent with PR can effectively delegate that PR and nominate someone else to pick up their child from school (in the same way as they could ask a childminder or relative to provide childcare), and best practice would be to tell the school and the other parent in advance. On rare occasions a court order may vary this (so that it requires the parent to collect the children from school personally or limits who they can nominate).</div>

Situation	Checklist
Conflict between parents on school premises	<div><div></div> Have you kept a record of any incidents, noting dates, times, and the nature of the conflicts?</div> <div><div></div> Have you spoken to your head of school or safeguarding lead about the situation?</div> <div><div></div> Could you request a private meeting with both parents (separately if necessary) to discuss how their conflicts are affecting their child and the school environment?</div> <div><div></div> Have you considered having a staff member present during the time that the conflict usually occurs (e.g. at pick up, drop off, school events)?</div>
Disagreement over a child's surname	<div><div></div> Have you checked your school's records for the child's legal name? The name registered on the birth certificate is the legal name unless it has been formally changed and that requires the consent from all with PR, through deed poll or court order. It is rare for a child's surname to be changed so ask for evidence.</div> <div><div></div> Have you consulted with your head of school or safeguarding lead about the situation?</div> <div><div></div> Have you remained neutral in the parents' dispute? It's not your role or responsibility to take sides.</div> <div><div></div> Have you documented any conversations about this issue with both parents?</div>
A parent with PR refuses consent for trips or activities when the other parent agrees and gives consent	<div><div></div> Have you asked the parent who has not provided consent for their reasons?</div> <div><div></div> Have you considered arranging a meeting with both parents (separately if necessary) to explain the educational value of the trip and see if a compromise can be reached?</div> <div><div></div> Have you documented all communications with both parents regarding this matter?</div> <div><div></div> Have you ensured that alternative arrangements are made for the child if they cannot attend the trip, so they don't feel excluded?</div> <div><div></div> Have you spoken to your head of school or safeguarding lead about the situation?</div>

In all circumstances, where there is a court order, check that it is the latest court order.

The Voice of the Child

Article 12 of the UNCRC, which has been ratified by the UK, states that any child who is capable of forming their own views should be consulted when decisions are made which affect them. The weight attached to the child’s views will be according to the age and maturity of the child.

It is important that young people know about their right to be consulted, and they may only hear about it from school. They need to be able to ask for a child consultation if they have views that they want to be taken into account when their parents are making decisions about their family.

If parents are resolving issues between themselves, or with the help of a mediator or solicitors, then the child can meet a specially trained child consultant, who will then feed back their views to the parents (and solicitors, if relevant). This is called child-inclusive mediation and is available to all children, regardless of whether their parents are discussing issues in mediation or not. Provided parents give their consent, a meeting can be set up for the child to meet the child consultant in private, and their views fed back to the parents.

If the parents are in court proceedings about the child, then the child should be consulted by CAFCASS, the court’s social workers. If for some reason this doesn’t happen, the child can ask to meet a child consultant, so that parents get to hear the child’s views that way.

There is information here about children’s rights to be consulted and how this happens:

[Children’s Voices in Family Separation – Family Solutions Group.](#)



A Word About the Family Court

Any involvement by the family court will always treat the child’s welfare as of paramount importance. Factors that will influence the analysis of child welfare are included in a ‘welfare checklist’:

- The child’s wishes and feelings in the light of their age and understanding;
- The child’s needs;
- The effects of change;
- The child’s age, sex, background;
- The harm that the child has suffered or is at risk of suffering;
- The relevant adults’ capacity to care for the child; and meet the child’s needs.

If you are confused about the terminology of anything legal in a court order or a legal document produced by a client, there’s a helpful glossary of legal terminology to be [found here](#).

5 to thrive

There will be a lot going on for children going through separation and it can be hard to know what to prioritise with making sure that they are OK. Here are five simple principles that schools and parents can focus on which we believe will provide the best platform for children to thrive after separation. We call them the ‘Five to Thrive’.



Holistic Communication Strategy
Parents and school should agree a joined-up communication strategy in which the parents have a transparent dialogue with the school around all school and home matters. No disagreements should be had at school or around the child(ren).



Friendship Groups
Parents and school should talk with each other about changes or concerns in the way the child’s friendship group may be changing or being impacted.



Schoolwork and Attendance
During a time of parental separation, there are additional pressures however schoolwork, homework and attendance will always be important. Parents and school to encourage children in all aspects and have an agreed approach to homework routines between both households.



Mental Health
Parents and school should keep a close eye on the mental health and wellbeing of the child(ren), and the school should ensure that the child(ren) have access to pastoral support with a nominated member of staff at the school.



Sports and Hobbies
Parents and school to ensure the child(ren) continue to participate in school extra extracurricular activities as this is important to their wider wellbeing.

Conclusion

We hope you will find this a helpful document. If you'd like more information about any aspect of how to manage family separations well in your school community, you can reach out to your local mediators or solicitors for further information.

Local Accredited Family Mediators

[Can be found here using a postcode search](#)

Local Resolution Solicitors

[Can be found here using a postcode search](#)

Resolution is an association of family lawyers who all adhere to a code of conduct which puts children's needs and family relationships first.



At the start I liked being at school because it took my mind off everything that was going on at home. But then it got harder to pretend everything was OK. I wish someone at school had helped me out by just little things, just asking how I was or giving me a chance to talk about things”

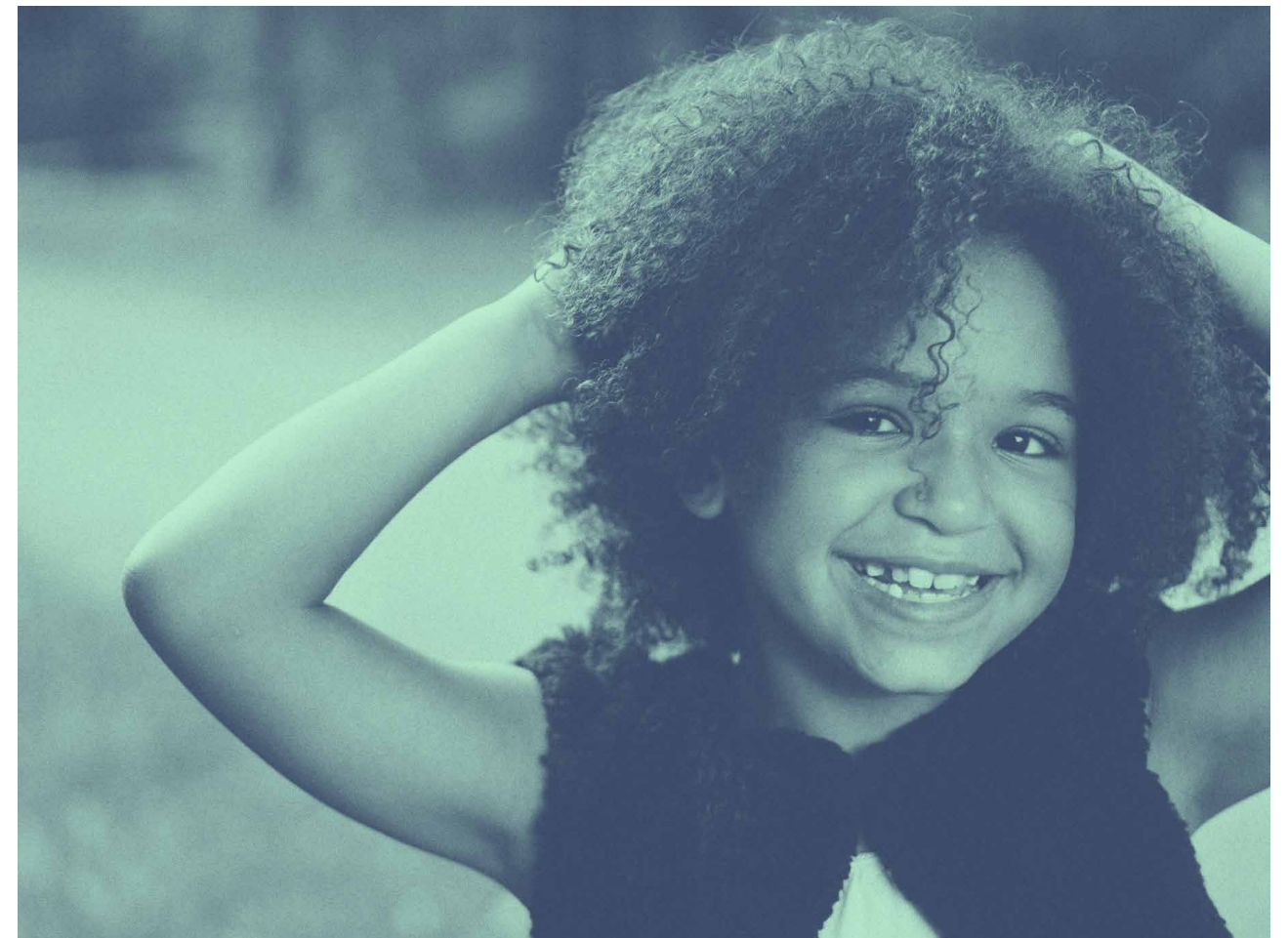
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The Positive Parenting Alliance & The Parents' Promise

The Positive Parenting Alliance is a group of organisations, and individuals, who believe that all children deserve the most positive experience possible during parental separation or divorce.

Our aim is to create a genuinely child-focused society and better systems to ensure the long-term wellbeing of children when parents separate.

In 2021 we launched [The Parents' Promise](#) and in 2025 commissioned our own research regarding parental separation in schools and its effect on children and launched this guide in support of educational professionals.





THE PARENTS PROMISE