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# Fostering a positive sense of home for children in shared parenting arrangements

Kylie Butler

*Australian Institute of Family Studies*

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Australian Institute of Family Studies  
Level 4, 40 City Road, Southbank VIC 3006 Australia  
Ph: (03) 9214 7888 Web: [aifs.gov.au](http://aifs.gov.au)

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## Overview

Understanding what home means to children, and what helps to create a positive experience of home, can help when working with children navigating the changes associated with shared parenting. This resource summarises what we know about the meaning of home for children (primary school age and above) following parental separation. It describes some common challenges children face when navigating life across 2 households and what can help create a positive experience of home post-parental separation. This resource also provides some considerations for practitioners and other professionals working with parents and children in shared parenting arrangements.

## Key messages

- When asked about the meaning of home, children commonly associated 'home' with a place where they experienced feelings of belonging, ease and being comfortable, and where they shared meaningful interactions with other people. Children rarely saw 'home' as simply the place where they lived.
- Relationships and emotional connection are often more important to children's sense of home than the amount of time spent there, the physical space or possessions. However, access to personal space and belongings can contribute to a child's positive sense of 'home'.
- Children's sense of home can be challenged by frequent transitions between locations, disrupted routines, changing family dynamics, conflict between parents and feelings of exclusion when parents re-partner.
- Children often feel left out of decisions about shared parenting arrangements. Asking children what is important to them when living with each parent and considering their preferences on living arrangements can help parents to ensure children feel safe and secure in each home.
- Practitioners can support parents to maintain and build their child's sense of home by encouraging them to consider their child's perspective and asking them to reflect on the strengths and challenges of their shared parenting arrangements.

## Introduction

Parental separation or divorce (hereafter 'parental separation') is a significant and often stressful life transition that typically involves major changes for both parents and children. For children, these changes can include where and who they live with, shifts in routines and family rituals and changing relationships with each parent (Baxter, 2025; Fehlberg et al., 2018; Francia & Millear, 2019; Natalier & Fehlberg, 2015).

Deciding how parenting and living arrangements will look after parental separation is an important step for families. In Australia, the most common arrangement following parental separation (in heterosexual relationships) is for children to live primarily with their mother and spend less time with their father (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2015; Baxter, 2025; Qu & Baxter, 2026). However, shared parenting arrangements<sup>1</sup> are increasingly popular (Berman & Daneback, 2022; Merson et al., 2023; Qu & Baxter, 2026).

There is no single definition of shared parenting but it is broadly understood as a post-separation parenting arrangement where parents share caring responsibilities for their child(ren) more equally and children spend at least 25% of their time with each parent (Berman & Daneback, 2022; Merson et al., 2023). These arrangements mean children move between 2 households, each with their own routines and relationships. In situations where it is safe,<sup>2</sup> and where there is a low level of conflict between parents, shared parenting can support children to nurture and maintain strong relationships with both parents (Baxter, 2025; Fehlberg et al., 2025; Steinbach, 2018).

Ideally, shared parenting involves parents and their child(ren) collaborating on important decisions affecting a child's life, such as health, education and leisure activities, with both homes offering a sense of safety and belonging and supporting the child(ren)'s development (Berman & Daneback, 2022; Steinbach, 2018). Yet, navigating life across 2 households can be challenging. Children often feel excluded from decisions that shape

<sup>1</sup> Shared parenting is sometimes referred to as shared care, co-parenting, joint physical custody or dual residence (Berman, 2018; Francia & Millear, 2019; Merson et al., 2023; Steinbach, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> In this context, the research literature uses 'safety' to refer to an absence of domestic and family violence (DFV) (Baxter, 2025). However, we acknowledge that there are numerous factors outside of DFV contexts that influence child physical, psychological and emotional safety.

their daily lives and relationships. They can feel unsettled or overwhelmed by the transition between households and struggle to connect with either of their parents' places as home (Lehtme & Toros, 2024).

Children's sense that the place where they live feels 'like home' is closely tied to their overall wellbeing. For children, a sense of feeling connected to and having positive experiences of a household is associated with psychological and emotional wellbeing, quality relationships with other household members and feeling supported to develop and express their identity (Campo et al., 2020; Fehlberg et al., 2025). When children do not feel this strong sense of 'home', it tends to be associated with feeling disconnected from, or unsupported by, other family members, arguing with parents and feeling stressed or unhappy (Fehlberg et al., 2018; Natalier & Fehlberg, 2015).

Understanding how children perceive and experience home in the context of shared parenting is important for parents and professionals working with families to help children feel safe and secure in both of their homes. Understanding children's preferences, concerns and what helps them feel at home can guide more child-centred approaches to shared parenting arrangements and help ease some of the challenges children commonly experience when transitioning to life in 2 homes.

This resource summarises what the research evidence says can help foster a positive sense of home for children in shared parenting arrangements following parental separation. It is intended to provide evidence that can inform practitioners who are working with children of primary school age or above and their families who are navigating, or have experienced, parental separation.

This resource – and the evidence it is based on – focuses on situations where it is considered safe for children to live with both parents. It does not discuss parental separation in the context of domestic and family violence.

## Nature of the evidence

This resource is based on a relatively small set of studies that focus on understanding what the concept of 'home' means to children (8–18 years old) who share their time across 2 parental homes and how this sense of home interacts with their adjustment to life following their parents' divorce or separation.

Much of the evidence on this topic is based on relatively small-scale qualitative research with children in Australia, New Zealand, Norway, Poland and Sweden. This research has commonly asked children what 'home' means to them and focused on their experiences of and beliefs about home across 2 locations (Fehlberg et al., 2025; Natalier & Fehlberg, 2015).

The qualitative data from this research is useful for identifying what commonly supports or challenges a child's sense of home when living in shared parenting arrangements. Generally, the research does not provide estimates of how common specific experiences are. For the most part, it looks broadly at children's experiences and does not compare experiences between different age groups.

The research has also primarily focused on families with parents in heterosexual relationships who have separated and decided on shared parenting arrangements. Most of the participants, particularly in the Australian studies, were from middle-income families.

Children in these studies were not asked about the reasons for their parents' separation or domestic and family violence (DFV). The research evidence indicates that the children in the studies were predominantly from families where it was considered safe for children to live with both parents (i.e. relatively low levels of conflict between parents).

There are potentially many factors influencing children's perceptions and experiences of home following parental separation that are not explored in the research and are therefore not covered in this resource. These include socio-demographic characteristics, cultural and social influences and time since the child lived with both parents together.

## What does 'home' mean to children in shared parenting arrangements?

Home is not just a physical space. Rather, it is both a place and a set of feelings created by the interaction between physical elements, such as the dwelling and a family's personal belongings, and non-physical elements, such as a child's relationships and perceptions about a place. Ideally, these elements combine to create a sense of connection, familiarity, safety and belonging (Campo et al., 2020; Fehlberg et al., 2021; Fehlberg et al., 2025; Natalier & Fehlberg, 2015).

For children navigating life after parental separation, the concept of 'home' can take on new meaning. What home looks like can change suddenly with different family dynamics and living arrangements, particularly when children find themselves moving between 2 households and living with one parent at a time (Francia & Milliar, 2019). A key goal of shared parenting in these situations is to foster a child's sense of home with each parent in each location (Fehlberg et al., 2018).

How someone perceives home and what is important to them in creating a sense of home is a personal thing. There is no 'one' way that children living in post-separation shared parenting arrangements perceive home. There is also no 'right' or 'wrong' way for children to think about home following parental separation.

However, research has identified some common themes from children in shared parenting arrangements about what home means and some common challenges associated with moving between 2 locations. The research has also identified some practices, environments and actions that can help children to feel at home at both parental residences. We discuss these common themes in the following sections.

## What creates a sense of home for children?

Although the specific elements of what makes 'home' will look different for every child, 4 broad characteristics are typically present when a child describes feeling at 'home' (Campo et al., 2020; Fehlberg et al., 2018; Fehlberg et al., 2025). These are:

- a sense of ease and comfort
- a sense of belonging and feeling welcome
- shared interests or experiences with other people living in the home, especially parents
- access to personal belongings and having personal space.

Research shows that, for most children, emotional connections and everyday interactions are more important than physical features in making a place feel comfortable and safe; that is, like 'home'. The quality of time spent with each parent is also generally more important to children than the amount of time they live in each place.

Nonetheless, physical objects and spaces can be important because of their association with familiar activities and relationships with other people in the household. For example, children often identify 'regular' household objects, such as the kitchen table or the couch, as important markers of home because of the family activities that take place around these spaces. Physical spaces and objects can also be important because children use them to express their personality and designate their personal space within the household (Campo et al., 2020; Fehlberg et al., 2018; Fehlberg et al., 2025; Johnsen et al., 2018; Natalier & Fehlberg, 2015; Walker, 2022).

In later [sections](#) we explore what parents and practitioners can do to nurture an environment where children feel at home when living in shared parenting arrangements.

# What can challenge children's sense of home in shared parenting arrangements?

It is normal for children to find navigating changes in living and parenting arrangements challenging. Shared parenting can involve frequent and ongoing changes that require (re)adjustments. This can include new parenting and living arrangements, switching between parents' residences and shifts in parenting styles and expectations as children move from one residence to another (Campo et al., 2020; Francia & Millea, 2019; Johnsen et al., 2018).

Some of the most common challenges or disruptions to a child's sense of home (in the context of shared parenting arrangements) relate to mobility and impermanence (e.g. not feeling as though they are a permanent member of a household or that they fully belong in one or both households), interparental conflict and changes in family dynamics (Campo et al., 2020; Francia & Millea, 2019; Johnsen et al., 2018; Reimann, 2023). These are discussed further below.

## Mobility and impermanence

In the research to date, very few children living in shared parenting arrangements have said they feel like they have 2 homes (Fehlberg et al., 2025; Johnsen et al., 2018; Lehtme & Toros, 2024; Natalier & Fehlberg, 2015). Children most commonly described feeling more 'at home' at their mother's place. This is usually the place where they spend the most time and keep most of their belongings, and is more likely to have been the family home prior to separation (Campo et al. 2020; Fehlberg et al., 2021; Fehlberg et al., 2025; Johnsen et al., 2018).

Some children find that living in 2 households makes it difficult to feel that either location is truly their 'home' and have described feeling as though they do not properly belong in either household. Although a common goal of shared parenting is to protect and nurture a child's relationships with both parents, children have sometimes described feeling that shared parenting arrangements mean they do not have enough quality time with either parent (Johnsen et al., 2018; Reimann, 2023).

Children have also described how physically moving between locations, and constantly having to pack and move personal belongings, can be inconvenient, stressful and contribute to feelings of impermanence. In particular, when children do not have a dedicated space of their own in a parent's home – for example, when they do not have a permanent place to sleep or keep their belongings – they can feel like a visitor rather than a member of the home (Johnsen et al., 2018).

## Conflict between parents

When parents argue or struggle to be polite to each other, their children can feel stressed, uncomfortable, guilty, angry with or protective of one or both parents. Conflict between parents, which can include parents badmouthing each other or using their child to pass messages to the other parent, can negatively impact children's interactions with their parents and make transitioning between residences more challenging (Berman & Daneback, 2022; Fehlberg et al., 2025; Francia & Millea, 2019; Johnsen et al., 2018; Merson et al., 2023; Steinbach, 2018).

When children anticipate conflict between parents during transitions, they tend to feel anxious in the lead up to moving between households or reluctant to go, even if they value spending time with both parents. Children might withdraw from talking about experiences that happened while they were living at the other parent's residence in case their present parent makes disparaging comments or gets upset (Berman & Daneback, 2022; Francia & Millea, 2019; Merson et al., 2023).

In these ways, conflict between parents can challenge child-parent relationships and negatively impact a child's sense of ease or comfort (i.e. their sense of 'home') when transitioning between and living in 2 households.

## Changing family dynamics

A child's sense of home can be disrupted by changes in family dynamics and/or family arrangements following parental separation. Even when parents consider their child's best interests when deciding on post-separation parenting arrangements, it can take time for children to settle into new physical spaces and adjust to changes in household compositions, relationships or routines.

Children often experience feelings of loss, grief or disconnection when one parent moves to a new residence, or if they are spending less time with one or both parents. When children are spending time in residences that are new to them, it can take time for the space to feel familiar and secure (Johnsen et al., 2018).

For some children, the experience of moving between residences can be emotionally taxing, even when their preference is to share time with both parents. Children can feel uncomfortable or guilty if they miss the parent they are not currently staying with or if they want to contact or spend time with the parent they are not currently living with (Francia & Milllear, 2019).

Research has described how, when a parent enters a new relationship, this can also disrupt a child's sense of home and/or challenge parent-child relationships. Children have reported spending less time and/or feeling they had less quality one-on-one time with a parent when that parent re-partnered (Fehlberg et al., 2018; Francia & Milllear, 2019; Merson et al., 2023).

Children's sense of home can be especially challenged when new partners or the children of new partners move into a parent's household or start to spend a lot of time there. Some children have reported feeling excluded or uncomfortable when having to share their parent, and their parent's residence, with people they did not know well. These changes to living arrangements can also lead to children feeling as though they have less autonomy or control over physical spaces and objects in the home, even of places and things that were previously special to them. This can then lead to children feeling as though their parent's place is no longer their home (Campo et al., 2020).

## What helps foster a positive sense of 'home' for children in shared parenting arrangements?

This section explores what the research says can support children's emotional connection to 'home' when they are moving between 2 households. It outlines some of the physical and relational actions or features that help children feel a sense of belonging, ease and connection in both spaces. These can help to mitigate some of the challenges and emotional impacts associated with living in shared parenting arrangements that we described in the previous section.

Much of this research focuses on what separated parents can do to help make a household a home. Practice considerations for child and family practitioners working with separated families are discussed later in this resource.

## Creating familiar and personal spaces

Personal space and items can help children feel a sense of familiarity and belonging to the space they are in. This contributes to children being able to express their interests and identity and to feel comfortable to 'be themselves' (Campo et al., 2020; Natalier & Fehlberg, 2015; Walker, 2022).

Children have reported that autonomy and choice about personal space and belongings can help them to feel more emotionally connected to a space (Campo et al., 2020; Carson et al., 2018; Davies, 2015; Fehlberg et al., 2025; Natalier & Fehlberg, 2015; Walker, 2022). This can be supported by ensuring that, in each household, children have their own bedroom or other area that is 'theirs' to retreat to, that they have space to store and display favourite items and that they can feel confident that their belongings are safe and treated respectfully when they are not there.

The research also shows that parents can help create a sense of familiarity in their household, and reduce the stress of packing to move between households, by doing some or all of the following:

- allowing children to identify which items they need and want to take with them when moving between households
  - for example, for younger children, small, favourite items that can be taken to each household (such as a special soft toy) can increase feelings of comfort and familiarity

- keeping some permanent items at each place to reduce the packing and moving of things
  - for example, having permanent toiletries, clothes, school or sports equipment, toys, books and games at each residence
- helping with packing and/or transport of personal items.

## Quality time with family

Children consistently emphasise that it is quality of time and relationships that makes a place feel like home and that this is more important than the amount of time they spend in each place. Certain relational experiences have been shown to contribute to a child feeling safe, connected and nurtured as well as developing a sense of 'home' and belonging when living in shared parenting arrangements (Campo et al., 2020; Carson et al., 2018; Fehlberg et al., 2018; Fehlberg et al., 2025; Francia & Millear, 2019; Natalier & Fehlberg, 2015).

Parental actions or ways of being that can help make a place feel comfortable and safe include:

- spending time in shared family spaces and doing 'everyday' activities. Children have highlighted simple things, rather than special events, as being most important to their sense of belonging within the household. This can include cooking and eating together, walking the dog, gardening, doing crafts or playing games, watching movies or TV or just 'hanging out' and talking.
- being attentive to their child's needs, demonstrating interest in what their child has to say and actively listening. This can include talking about the child's day and remembering or asking about a child's favourite things (foods, activities, special interests).
- embracing a child's personality and quirks and encouraging them to express their opinions and be themselves
- helping the child to spend time in the household with household members (parents, siblings, pets) and with extended family and friends who they care about and who care about them.

## Navigating new relationships in the home

When parents re-partner, children may need to adjust to new people in their home environment. This can affect how comfortable and connected they feel in the space. Research suggests children feel more welcome, supported and have a stronger sense of belonging when new partners are warm, show an interest in the child, include them in activities and are respectful of the child's relationship with both their parents (Campo et al., 2020; Davies, 2015; Fehlberg et al., 2025; Francia & Millear, 2019; Johnsen et al., 2018; Merson et al., 2023).

## Interactions between parents

Children feel more emotionally secure and relaxed when their parents cooperate and communicate respectfully. The following can help children feel safe and welcome at both households (Campo et al., 2020; Carson et al., 2018; Fehlberg et al., 2025; Francia & Millear, 2019; Johnsen et al., 2018):

- low levels of conflict between parents, particularly when the child is present, such as during changeovers. This also includes being respectful when talking about the other parent to the child.
- collaborative parenting – when parenting is more collaborative, and the rules and parenting styles in each home are consistent with each other, this can reduce the amount of change that children need to adjust to when transitioning between households.

## Giving children a voice in parenting arrangements

Children feel more at home when they are heard, respected and involved in decisions that affect their living arrangements. This fosters trust, autonomy and emotional wellbeing. To support children in having a 'voice' in decisions that affect them, parents can have age-appropriate conversations with their children about parenting and living arrangements, listen to their child's wishes and concerns, prioritise their children's interests when making decisions about shared parenting and be flexible about adjusting arrangements as the child's needs and preferences change over time (Berman, 2018; Berman & Daneback, 2022; Campo et al., 2020; Carson et al., 2018; Fehlberg et al., 2025).

## Practice considerations for working with parents and children in shared parenting arrangements

Much of the research on creating a sense of 'home' for children following parental separation focuses on parental actions and relationships. However, practitioners can play a vital role in helping families navigate shared parenting arrangements by supporting children's sense of home wherever they live. Understanding what fosters a child's sense of 'home' – that is, what helps them feel safe, valued and connected – can guide meaningful conversations with both children and parents.

Practitioners can talk with parents in shared parenting arrangements about the importance of creating a sense of 'home' at each household and about the connection between a child's relationship with each parent and feeling safe and secure. Practitioners can share with parents the information outlined in the previous sections about what can help build a sense of home when household dynamics and/or physical spaces change (also refer to [Further reading and resources](#) for further information for parents).

It can also be valuable for practitioners working with children to explore what 'home' means to the child. This can provide valuable insights on children's emotional needs and preferences. Listening to what children say about 'home' can also help the important adults in their lives to better understand the child's experience of living in 2 households and to consider decisions from their perspective.

Drawing on the research literature, we provide some suggestions to guide practitioners' conversations with children and parents about promoting a child's sense of 'home' in shared parenting arrangements (Fehlberg et al., 2021; Fehlberg et al., 2025).

### Questions to guide conversations with children



- What does home mean to you?
- Where do you feel most at home?
- Who or what makes a place feel like home?
- What helps you feel relaxed, safe or happy at home?
- Is there anything that makes it easier or harder when you move from one house to the other?

Practitioners can support parents to maintain and build their child's sense of home following parenting separation by encouraging them to consider their child's perspective and reflect on what they think the strengths and challenges of their shared parenting arrangements are. This can include sharing with parents some of what the child has said about what makes a place feel like home (provided the child has given permission) but also by encouraging them to discuss the meaning of home with their child.

These conversations can be helpful to guide decisions about parenting arrangements that consider parent and child needs. The suggestions below can be used as starting points.

### Questions to guide conversations with parents



- What do you think your child would say makes a place feel like home?
- How do your shared parenting arrangements create opportunities for shared activities and time with your children?
- Are there spaces at home that support connection, interaction, togetherness and the creation of shared memories?
- How do you think your child experiences the transition between homes? Are there things that make this easier or harder for the family?
- How do you and your child's other parent communicate about your child's emotional and practical needs?

## Conclusion

Shared parenting arrangements have the potential to support children's wellbeing and positive child-parent relationships. However, for many children, adjusting to life across 2 households takes time and can bring feelings of disconnection or uncertainty. Understanding what 'home' means to children in shared parenting, and what is important to create a sense of home, can help support children to have positive shared parenting experiences.

When children feel at home, they experience comfort, belonging and emotional safety. This is shaped by warm parent-child relationships, shared activities and meaningful routines, personal space and being included in decision making about things that affect their daily lives.

Practitioners can help separated families build safe and supportive environments for their children in both households by encouraging open conversations about what home means to children, and by guiding parents to create spaces and relationships that reflect those needs.

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## Further reading and resources

### AIFS and Emerging Minds

#### [ICT use to enhance parent-child relationships after separation](#)

This short article summarises findings from Baude and colleagues (2023) and explores information and communication technology (ICT) practices, usage patterns and issues in the context of child-parent communication following parental separation.

#### [Supporting your child's wellbeing during separation or divorce](#)

This resource, from Emerging Minds, offers information about children's experiences and reactions to parents' separation and advice from other parents, health professionals and researchers about ways parents can lessen the impacts of separation on children.

#### [When parents live apart](#)

This research report illustrates the complexity of family circumstances faced by children whose parents live apart due to relationship breakdown, using data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC). It explores post-separation parenting arrangements, co-parenting and various aspects of family life in the context of child wellbeing.

#### [Children's support needs following parental separation](#)

This resource summarises research evidence of children's experiences of parental separation and support needs, including information about child-inclusive practice and age-appropriate support.

### Other organisations

#### [Separation, divorce, children in 2 homes](#)

After separation or divorce, children need time to get used to moving between 2 homes. The [Raising Children Network](#) provides information about challenges and support needs when children and teenagers are struggling with different homes and tips to support the transition to new living arrangements after separation or divorce.

#### [Parenting when you're not living with your child](#)

This webpage from the [Raising Children Network](#) provides tips for parents who do not live with their child following parental separation. It outlines the importance of quality time and offers strategies on how to make your house feel like 'home' for your child.

#### [Children & parenting after separation](#)

Separation is a challenging time for children and parents, and it can be difficult for parents to focus on children's long-term wellbeing when upset or stressed. Family Relationships Online provides general information about talking to and supporting children through separation, parenting agreements, re-partnering and blended families, and support services for parents and children.

#### [How to support your young person through parental separation and divorce](#)

When parents separate, family life can change in many ways for children and young people. This article by headspace focuses on separation and divorce due to relationship breakdown between the parents or primary carers of young people, with information about young people's experiences and challenges. It provides tips for supporting a young person through parental separation and links to additional resources and support, including for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

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