

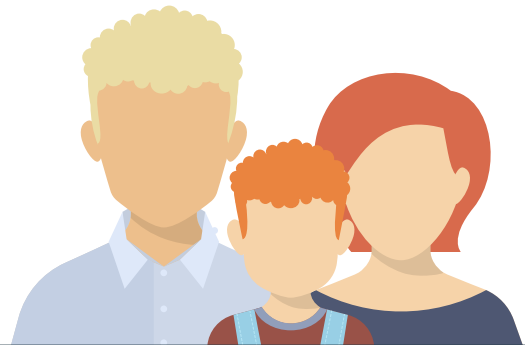


Guidance for how to parent with an abusive ex-partner



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- | | |
|--|--|
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Introduction

This guidance is for parents who have been subjected to abuse from the other parent of their child. In these cases, standard “co-parenting” and advice regarding parental conflict is usually unsuitable due to the abuse from one partner.

In the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, a child is anyone under 18, and they are recognised as victims of domestic abuse if they see, hear, or experience the effects of abuse between two “personally connected” adults (aged 16+) who are related to them. The Act specifically includes children as victims in their own right.

This guidance was written alongside parents who have been subjected to abuse and experienced parenting with an abusive ex-partner, in conjunction with specialists in parental conflict and domestic abuse. This guidance is not legal advice and should not be used as such.

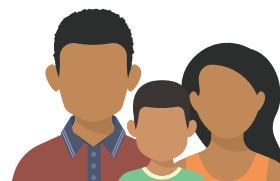
This guidance is not “one size fits all”, all circumstances vary, however, it is hoped that the information provided will enable parents to make informed decisions in their individual situations.

Throughout the guidance, there will be links to further reading, this is not an endorsement of any particular agencies or companies and is only to provide greater detail.

Unsure whether your relationship is **Domestic Abuse or Parental Conflict?**



Cambridgeshire & Peterborough
Domestic Abuse & Sexual
Violence Partnership



You may find yourself with a gut feeling that something isn't right in your relationship, or you may wonder whether the behaviours you are experiencing from your partner or ex-partner are abusive. Domestic abuse and relationship conflict are very different (although can look similar). If you are affected by either it's important to get the appropriate advice and support.

Questions to consider if you are worried you may be subjected to abuse by your partner or ex-partner

There are different kinds of domestic abuse, but it's usually about having power and control over the other person. If you answer yes to any of the below, you could be experiencing abuse from a partner or co-parent.

Are you experiencing any of the below?:

Psychological:

- They frighten or scare you
- You are prevented from going about your everyday activities or they restrict where you go
- They threaten to hurt or kill you, your family or pets and you believe they would do this
- They destroy your possessions
- They access your emails, text messages or letters without your consent
- You are harassed or followed by them

Physical:

- They hit, slap or punch you
- They kick or bite you
- They push or shove you
- They drive dangerously to intentionally frighten you

Emotional:

- They belittle you, put you down, or tell you that you are always wrong
- They blame you for the arguments or for the abuse
- You are prevented from going to work or college
- They expect you to meet unreasonable demands for attention
- They accuse you of flirting or having affairs
- They are isolating you from your family and friends

Financial:

- They limit or control your access to money or assets
- You are being prevented from working

Sexual:

- You are touched in a way you don't want to be touched
- They place unwanted sexual demands upon you, or make you feel that you cannot say no to sex
- They call you hurtful names like 'slag'
- They take photos of intimate moments without your consent



IF ANY ABOVE BOXES ARE TICKED, YOU MAY BE EXPERIENCING DOMESTIC ABUSE.

Domestic abuse can happen against anyone — regardless of age, background, gender identity, sex, religion, sexual orientation or ethnicity, and anybody can be an abuser.

Where to find **support for domestic abuse**

Please contact **Domestic Abuse Support Service (DASS)** if you live in **Cambridgeshire** and you would like to access support or talk to a professional about what you are experiencing.

Telephone: 0300 373 1073 (freephone)
Email: DASSreferrals@impakt.org.uk
Website <https://impakt.org.uk/domestic-abuse>

Please contact **The Peacock Project at PWA** if you live in **Peterborough** and you would like to access support or talk to a professional about what you are experiencing.

Telephone: 01733 894964
Email: referrals@wa-support.co.uk
Website www.peterboroughwomensaid.co.uk

If you are not experiencing any of the above, but you are experiencing some of the below behaviours in the relationship with your current or ex-partner, it is more likely the situation is relationship conflict.

What does conflict look like?

- Trying to win
- Making personal comments
- Not listening to each other
- Silent treatment

- No resolution at the end of an argument
- Shouting, swearing, bickering
- Undermining each other
- Your child/ren wishing you were friends with each other

Where to find **support for relationship conflict**

Relationship interventions provided by OnePlusOne are designed to help parents reflect on conflict in their relationship with current or ex-partners, as well as the impact on their children. www.oneplusone.org.uk/parents

If you would like more information on the support available for relationship conflict, please get in touch: Call: 07554 151514 • Email: rpclead@cambridgeshire.gov.uk

FIND ME
ONLINE





Domestic Abuse can continue after separation, and this is often called “post separation abuse”. There are agencies in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough who can support you. **If you are being subjected to abuse** visit www.cambsdasv.org.uk for more information.

The Law / Legal Requirements

Does the other parent have Parental Responsibility?

This can make a significant difference to how you can protect yourself and your child from the domestic abuse and it is important to know if both parents have parental responsibility.

Parental rights and responsibilities: What parental responsibility is

www.gov.uk/parental-rights-responsibilities



Parental responsibility is the legal framework defining the duties and powers a parent holds for their child’s life and development.

It is the legal term used to describe a parent’s rights, duties, and authority in relation to their child. This includes responsibility for making major decisions about the child’s upbringing, welfare, and property, such as education, healthcare, naming, and where they live. In essence, it means having the duty to protect, care for, and guide the child.

It’s about the responsibilities towards the child, not just parental rights, and involves making key life choices, even if parents are not in a relationship, requiring participation from all with PR on significant matters.

It is important to know if your ex-partner has parental responsibility – this is automatically the case for the birth mother, and for the father

when he and the birth mother are married or in a civil partnership.

Unmarried fathers will have Parental Responsibility if they are present when the birth is registered. Step Parents and Grand Parents do not have parental responsibility unless this is applied for at court.

Stepfathers also have the option of a Parental Responsibility agreement with consent of all those who have PR. Grandparents can obtain parental responsibility by applying for an order eg. a Child Arrangements order or a Special Guardianship order.



Can I stop contact with the child's other parent if I believe they will cause harm?

Where there has been domestic abuse the protective parent can refuse contact if this is in the best interest of the child. The abusive parent would need to contact court and seek an order to be able to have contact with the child/ren.



[Protecting my children - National Domestic Abuse Helpline](#)

If there is a court order in place for contact this must be complied with. If the parent has concerns about contact, they should apply to the court to vary the order and be prepared to demonstrate to the court the reasons for the variance. However, this could take several months.

If you have significant safeguarding concerns for your child in the care of the other parent, please contact Peterborough or Cambridgeshire County Council Children's Social Care.



[Safeguarding children | Peterborough City Council](#)



<https://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/residents/children-and-families/children-s-social-care>



If my ex-partner does not bring my child home as agreed, can I call the police?

Police will only intervene in specific circumstances, for example, breach of a non-molestation order or another court order, otherwise they will deem it a civil matter.

If the ex-partner does NOT have Parental Responsibility the police could be called to ask for assistance in helping to have the children returned. The police will not always assist in these circumstances. If the parent does have Parental Responsibility and there is no court order, an urgent application would need to be made to court to get the child returned as the police would not be able to return the child in this instance.

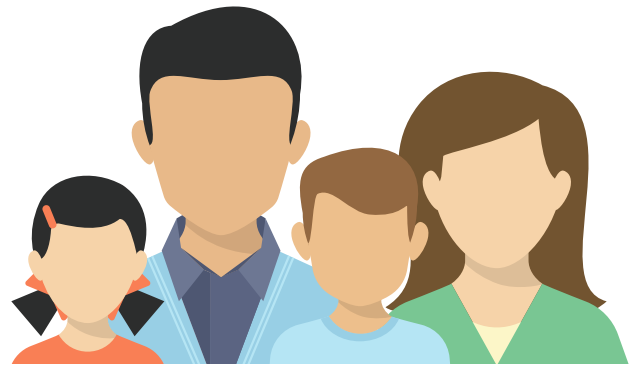


[What happens if my ex won't give our child back? - Family Law Partners](#)



Family Court / Orders

The majority of separated parents will not seek orders from Family Court in relation to their children. However, Family Courts may grant orders specifying arrangements for contact or time to be spent with children and their parents. Family courts will also hear cases where the person subjected to abuse seeks a **Non-Molestation Order** against the abusive person.



[Cafcass-Family-Forum-top-tips-for-parents-on-the-impact-of-parental-separation-and-court-proceedings-on-children \(5\).pdf](#)



[Family - Courts and Tribunals Judiciary](#)

Family courts will encourage parents to come to an arrangement outside of the court process, this is called mediation. Parents can be invited to attend Mediation Information and Assessment meetings (MIAMs). In cases where one partner/ex-partner has been abusive, “Shuttle” mediation can be arranged.



[What Is Shuttle Mediation? | National Family Mediation.](#)

Which orders can a Family Court put in place?



[Making child arrangements if you divorce or separate: Apply for a court order - GOV.UK](#)

Consent Order

If you have agreed on child arrangements with your ex-partner, you can apply for a consent order to make the agreement legally binding. The consent order needs to be signed by both parents and can include details about how your child is looked after. A judge or magistrate will review and decide whether to confirm the order. You do not usually have to attend court.

Child Arrangements Order

CAO – A child arrangements order is when the court decides where your child lives, who they will spend time with and whether other types of contact will take place. In reality this can

take months or years. Abusive ex-partners can repeatedly take orders back to court as a form of control unless the Judge makes a direction regarding future applications.



[Explaining the legality of a Child Arrangements Order - childlawadvice.org.uk](#)

Specific Issue Order - You can ask the court to help you agree on a specific issue, for example where your child should go to school.

Prohibited Steps Order

A prohibited steps order stops your ex-partner from making any permanent decisions about your child’s upbringing. For example, taking your child out of the country.

Non Molestation Order

NMO - protects you or your child from being harmed or threatened by the person who has abused you - this is called a non-molestation order.



[Get an injunction if you've been the victim of domestic abuse: Overview - GOV.UK](#)



What is a Parenting Plan?

A Family Court parenting plan (often called “**Our Child’s Plan**” in the UK) is a written agreement between separated parents that outlines how they will raise their children.

It is designed to prioritise the child’s best interests and minimise conflict by establishing clear routines.

Key Components

A comprehensive plan should cover daily logistics and long-term decisions:

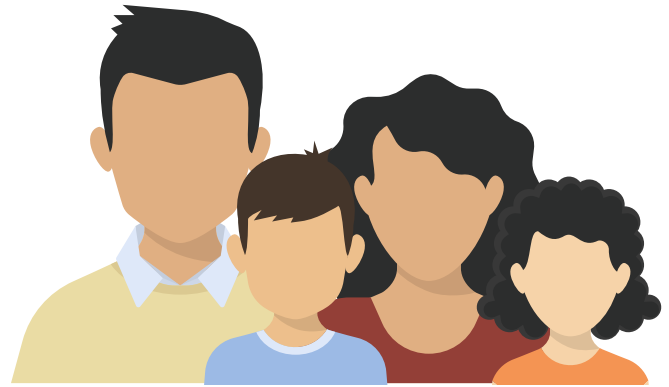
- **Living Arrangements:** Where the child lives, the schedule for “parenting time,” and how transitions/handovers will occur
- **Education:** Choice of school, attendance at parent-teacher meetings, and who supervises homework
- **Healthcare:** Who manages routine medical and dental appointments and how emergency information is shared
- **Communication:** How parents will talk to each other (e.g., email or text) and how the child will keep in touch with the parent they are not staying with
- **Special Occasions:** Arrangements for birthdays, school holidays, and religious festivals
- **Finances:** Agreements on day-to-day costs like school uniforms or extracurricular activities (separate from formal child maintenance)

Legal Status

- **Voluntary:** Most parenting plans are informal and **not legally binding by default** – BUT this can be agreed by a judge with a consent order
- **Making it Binding:** If you want the plan to be enforceable, you must apply for a **Consent Order**. This involves drafting the agreement



into a formal legal document, usually with a solicitor, and submitting [Form C100 to the Family Court for a judge’s approval](#)



It is important that you think about the coming years and not just the current age of the children, and plan for the future in the plan.

Expect abusive ex-partners to push boundaries set as part of the parenting plan. You will need to stay alert and try to stick to the plan and do not agree to make constant changes.

You may think you are doing best you can for your child by being flexible, but this is likely to be exploited by the ex-partner.

The prospect of Family Court involvement can feel overwhelming. When facing threats of legal action, it may be helpful to consider the following:

- Identify those who may be able to support you through this process, personally or professionally
- Evidence that your parenting keeps your children safe and well (see guidance at the end of this document)
- Is your ex-partner raising the possibility of Family Court intervention out of genuine concern for the children, or as a means of control?

It is also advisable to think about what evidence you may need if the matter does progress to court. This could include letters from school demonstrating your positive relationship and ongoing engagement with them.

Family Court proceedings relating to child arrangements in England and Wales typically take between six and twelve months to reach a resolution but could be much longer.

Finances

Parents have a financial responsibility for their children. The Child Maintenance Service is able to assess the amount a parent must contribute. It is recommended that where there has been abuse in the past, the primary parent requests a “direct award” payment to minimise any contact between parents.

You can use the [Child Maintenance Service](#) to arrange child maintenance if you do not want your child’s other parent to know your location or personal information. Please note that this approach is not entirely foolproof, and parents who are unwilling to contribute may still identify ways to avoid payment.

Abusive people will often seek to control and manipulate their ex-partner by withholding finances. If possible, manage finances so that

the child support is in addition to basic essentials and bills to avoid difficulty if the money expected does not arrive. Ensure you have a clear agreement on how any foreseeable costs will be shared — including school trips, days out, treats, and birthday presents. Establishing clarity now can reduce disputes in the future.

There are a variety of benefits available for parents. Check if you are getting everything you are entitled to in order to support your child.

[Benefits calculators - GOV.UK](#)



What is Co-Parenting

...and why might this be unsuitable within the dynamics of domestic abuse?

What is Co Parenting?

Co parenting refers to collaborative parenting by separated or divorced parents. This is the case even without an ongoing romantic relationship, as both parents should share decision-making and responsibilities for their child’s welfare, such as education, routines, and emotional needs.

It should be based on cooperation, respectful communication, and putting the child first, helping them to maintain strong relationships with both parents.

Why Co-Parenting May Be Unsuitable in Situations of Domestic Abuse

1. Ongoing Abuse and Coercive Control

- Abusers often use co parenting as a means of continuing manipulation post-separation
- Tactics include controlling exchanges,

using children as messengers, or even employing intimidation through parenting responsibilities

2. Emotional Harm to Children

- Exposure to abuse or conflict between parents can lead to children feeling unsafe, distrusting adults, experiencing anxiety and low self-esteem
- When there is continued abuse, conflict between parents or undermining each other, children can suffer emotional distress, confusion and loyalty conflicts



3. Conflict-Fuelled Arrangements Are Detrimental

- Co-parenting depends on mutual respect and low conflict
- In high-conflict, abusive relationships, co-parenting may become impractical or unsafe, as one parent may use contact for harassment, legal gamesmanship or to demean the other parent

4. Alternative: Parallel Parenting

- Instead of co-parenting, parallel parenting is often recommended when there is a history of domestic abuse
- This model emphasizes minimal direct contact and frequent clear boundaries, focusing on children's needs while limiting interaction between parents

What is Parallel Parenting?

Parallel parenting is a structured approach designed for abusive or high conflict situations, which minimises direct interaction between parents while ensuring the child's needs are met.

Each parent cares for the child during their own time without interference from the other. For example, in co-parenting bedtimes are agreed and consistent in both homes. In high conflict arrangements there is often "counter parenting" which purposefully disrupts any agreements.

With parallel parenting, each home has its own ways of working, which the other parent does not get to interfere with as long as there are no safeguarding concerns.

The Key Principles of Parallel Parenting

1. Minimal Contact

- Communication is limited to essential matters only (e.g. health, emergencies)
- Use written channels like email or parenting apps

2. Clear Boundaries

- Each parent makes day-to-day decisions during their parenting time
- No criticism or interference in the other parent's household

3. Structured Parenting Plan

- Detailed schedules for handovers, holidays, and special occasions
- Specific rules for pick-up/drop-off (e.g. neutral locations, third-party involvement if needed)

4. Safety Measures

- If domestic abuse occurred, consider supervised exchanges or using a contact centre or via a third person
- Avoid face-to-face meetings; rely on intermediaries or staggered timings

How to Set It Up

Create a Written Parenting Plan:

- Include schedules, communication rules, and decision-making boundaries

Use Court Orders if Necessary:

- If abuse is documented, make an application for a Child Arrangements Order specifying parallel parenting terms

Leverage Technology:

- Parenting apps help track communication and reduce conflict

Seek Professional Support:

- Family mediators or solicitors can help draft a safe plan

- Domestic abuse specialists can advise on risk management

Benefits

- Protects the child from ongoing conflict
- Reduces opportunities for coercive control
- Provides stability and predictability for the child



<https://osborneslaw.com/blog/parallel-parenting>



www.amazon.co.uk/Parallel-Parenting-Solution-Eliminate-Conflict-ebook/dp/B097Z5QLGB?ref=ast_author_mpb



Communication Strategy

Keeping all communications in one central location (like an app) is ideal so that all communications are in writing. Apps are often court-approved and have built in functions that prevent message tampering.



[AppClose: Co-Parent Essentials – Apps on Google Play](#)

[OurFamilyWizard – The Best Coparenting App](#)



TIP» If you are communicating in WhatsApp, but their messages cause anxiety, ensure they go to the Archived messages and look at them when you have the capacity.

TIP» Set up a separate email account only for that person.

that is factual, concise and strictly focused on the practical details.

If you are not able to have direct communication with the other parent, arrangements can be made through a third party (trusted friend or family member), the third party could also do this via the app.

TIP» Be considered in your communication – don't write anything you wouldn't want read out in court. If you have a trusted person you could ask them to read through any correspondence before you press "send".

TIP» The other parent knows exactly how to "press your buttons" or upset you – be calm, don't hand over your power by giving them what they want. They WANT a reaction – DON'T give them the satisfaction.

Responding to the other parent

Things rarely require an immediate response, if it isn't an emergency, take your time and respond, rather than reacting and saying something you may regret later on.

If you must respond, respond in the clearest, most concise way possible. Be clear and firm.

Imagine you are taking a business like approach.

Aim to avoid engaging in personal matters, even when faced with personal insults. Respond only to issues directly related to the children and ignore everything else. For example, if you are discussing arrangements for parents evening or an extra-curricular activity provide a response



At first, parallel parenting may feel difficult or even counter-intuitive as it can go against your natural instincts. Until now, you have acted appropriately by being as reasonable and flexible as possible for the children. However, this approach is only effective when both parents are able to co-parent with empathy, cooperation and a shared focus on the children's wellbeing. This new style of communication may be challenging in the beginning, but it is important to persist with it. Concentrate on the time you have with your children and maintain clear boundaries. Avoid allowing your ex-partner to intrude on your time with the children or discussions with them.

Phone calls

It's important to set clear rules for phone calls between households. These rules should be specific and well-defined. For example: calls take place on Mondays between 6 and 6:30 pm.

Changes to the schedule

When the other parent requests changes, avoid altering the schedule unless absolutely necessary. Establish a clear, consistent routine and stick to it. Do not create exceptions or alter the rules. If the other parent requests a change, simply decline by stating: “No, we’re not changing the agreement.” You do not need to explain, justify, or provide reasons. Likewise, do not expect the other parent to adjust their schedule for you.

TIP» The other parent may consistently return the children later than anticipated – if this is likely to be the case, agree return times earlier, so that the “lateness” causes as little stress as possible. Wherever possible, anticipate sabotage in an effort to reduce your own stress.

TIP» If you know the other parent is likely to sabotage plans, be prepared – for example, if you have plans when the children are next with the other parent, don’t let the children know, so they don’t mention it to the other parent – children should not be expected to keep secrets, don’t tell them anything you wouldn’t want them to tell the other parent.

Birthdays and holidays

For birthdays and holidays, the most effective approach is to keep celebrations separate, respecting the traditions and values of each household. Plan individual birthday parties rather than joint celebrations, as combined events can feel awkward, create tension, and often shift the focus away from the children. The same principle applies to all holidays—whether Easter, Christmas, or any other occasion. Celebrate these events on a different day when the children are in your care.

Carrying possessions back and forth

For the purpose of parallel parenting, a helpful guideline is: items that belong in one home should stay in that home. When setting up your home to be fully independent, that includes

belongings so your child can move freely between homes without the inconvenience of transporting their possessions back and forth.

There’s nothing wrong with having duplicate items in both households.

With respect to school items and uniform and equipment, make it clear in the parenting plan that this must be returned with the child.



Communicating with your children

For the children, keep the message simple and reassuring: “This is how we’re doing things, and you are loved and valued.” Avoid speaking negatively about the other parent or undermining them in any way. Never demonise the other parent. Instead, focus on empowerment—setting healthy boundaries, maintaining standards, and creating meaningful life experiences for your children. The other parent is half of them and this needs to be respected. It is natural to need to “vent” or complain about an ex partner – identify safe people to do this with – it is NOT your children, regardless of their age.

You may notice your child showing signs of distress, such as becoming upset, angry, or more emotional. These responses are common in children who have been affected by parental domestic abuse. Your child may also demonstrate negative or challenging behaviours in school. It can be helpful to talk with your child

about their experiences and memories, offering reassurance that their feelings are valid and understandable. Acknowledging their emotions can support their sense of safety and help them begin to process what they have been through.



What you need to do

Avoid conflict and be “business like” as much as you can possibly muster. Respect that what happens whilst your children are with their other parent is not your responsibility unless there is a safeguarding concern.

You should never commit the children to any event or activity that would require the other parent’s attendance without first obtaining their knowledge and consent.

If they say something that isn’t accurate or false, stay calm and don’t respond, let it go. If they are rude, ignore.

Both parents are accountable for what they create with the children. Both are accountable for how things turn out, but you can only control you.

Working with Professionals

If you have a social worker or a family worker or have meetings with schools you can request that meetings do not have both of you in the same room at the same time. The agencies should ensure that your path does not cross

with the person who abused you, if you are still in fear of them.

With professionals be as factual as you can, do not resort to insults about the other parent.

Ensure that any professionals you are working with have a copy of any parenting plans or arrangements and copies of any court orders that are in place.

Do the school know the agreement and any legal agreement about collecting the child/ren? Do they know what the other parent looks like? Schools will have no choice but to allow the other parent to take them from school if they have parental responsibility where there is not an order in place preventing them from doing so.

Don’t feel pressured by professionals to attend a meeting with the other parent if you don’t feel safe to do so, but put this in writing to that professional.

Don’t feel pressured to facilitate contact for your children with the other parent if you don’t feel comfortable in doing so. You should not be expected to supervise contact.



Where there are events at school or for extracurricular activities, try to work with the sports club or school to be able to attend at different times. There may be things that you miss to be able to avoid the other parent, whilst unfortunate, this may be unavoidable.

Key principles for a Parenting Plan when abuse has been present

It's completely understandable that you want a well-structured, future-proof parenting plan — especially when the other parent has been abusive. When abuse is part of the history, a parenting plan must prioritise safety, clarity, and predictability above anything else.

Below is a comprehensive list of what to consider, written in a way that keeps things practical, trauma-informed, and appropriate for use with professionals (courts, mediators, social care).

This is about safety-focused planning, not legal advice.

Your plan should be:

- Child-centred
- Specific and unambiguous
- Structured to reduce direct conflict
- Focused on safety
- Future-proof for the next several years
- Ambiguity is the enemy of safety. Clarity protects you and your children

Safety First

Clear, bounded contact arrangements. Avoid anything open-ended like “reasonable contact.” Instead, specify:

- Exact days and times
- Exact handover arrangements
- Location of handover
- Who is responsible for drop-off/collection
- What happens on bank holidays, birthdays, Christmas

Safe Handover Arrangements. If direct contact is unsafe or triggering:

- Use school as the handover point
- Or a trusted third party
- Or a public, safe location
- Or (if appropriate) ask for supervised or supported contact via a service

- The goal: minimal face-to-face interaction

Zero In-person Communication (if needed)

Your plan can specify:

- No unplanned visits
- No turning up at your home/work
- All communication through approved channels

Communication Boundaries. Method of communication

Options:

- Email only
- A parenting app
- Messaging only about children, never personal matters

Specify:

- No phone calls unless pre-arranged
- No late-night messages
- No messages containing aggression or criticism

Emergencies

Define what counts as an emergency and the correct communication method.



Decision-Making:

For the next several years, your plan should state exactly how decisions are made.

Major Decisions to Specify

- Education
- Medical treatment
- Religion
- Travel abroad
- Change of residence

You can include:

- A timeframe for the other parent to respond (e.g., 7 days)
- What happens if they don't reply
- That communication must remain child-focused and factual

Consistency & Routine

Children feel safer with predictable:

- Bedtimes
- Mealtimes
- Homework routines
- Screen time guidelines
- Health and medical expectations
- Clothing, hygiene and care
- You can outline shared expectations, but be realistic — you can't control their parenting

You can set:

- Your own routines
- Your own expectations
- Safety rules
- What the children need to return with

Items the Children Need

To avoid conflict:

- Agree a list of what travels between homes (e.g., school uniform, coat, medication)
- Who replaces lost items
- Who pays for school trips or extra activities
- Clarity stops arguments

Holidays and School Breaks

Plan ahead for:

- Half terms
- Easter
- Summer
- Christmas
- Birthdays
- Parent's birthdays
- Mother's/Father's Day

Be specific:

- Dates
- Times
- Handovers
- Travel arrangements



Contact When the Children Are Away

Specify what is allowed:

- Video calls? Audio?
- How often and at what time
- No surprise calls
- No lengthy or distressing calls
- Structure protects the children from emotional manipulation

Children's Emotional Needs

Your plan can highlight that:

- The child should not be questioned about the other parent
- The child should not be used as a messenger
- The child's emotional state after contact must be taken into account
- The child's routines and sleep must be respected
- The child can contact either parent if distressed (age-appropriate)

Conflict Resolution

To reduce future disputes:

- Outline how disagreements are handled (e.g., cooling-off period → written communication → mediation if needed)
- Specify unacceptable behaviours (shouting, threats, harassment, pressures)
- State that all communication must remain respectful and child-focused

Review Dates

The children's needs change:

- Set a review every 12–24 months
- Or after major life events (school changes, health diagnoses, etc.)

A built-in review makes your plan future-proof

Your Boundaries

Without criticising, your plan can say:

- There will be no discussion about past relationship issues
- There will be no confrontation in front of the children
- You do not accept communication that is abusive, controlling, or threatening
- You will only engage about the children's needs

What NOT to leave open-ended

Avoid vague phrases such as:

- "As agreed between the parents"
- "Flexible contact"
- "Reasonable contact"
- "Parents will communicate as needed"

These are high-risk in abusive dynamics and create conflict





HOW TO GUIDE

Evidence that your parenting keeps your children safe and well

Professionals look at whether the child's basic needs are being met. Evidence can include:

Physical Care

- Regular meal routines, balanced diet
- Clean, appropriate clothing
- Safe, clean home environment
- Evidence of regular sleep routines

How to evidence this:

- Photos of meals, charts of routines, or notes from school/nursery
- Records of health or dental appointments

Demonstrate Health & Wellbeing

- Up-to-date GP, dental, optometrist appointments
- Immunisations (if you choose them)
- Records of attendance at medical appointments
- Examples of nurturing behaviour: praise, warmth, conversation, comfort
- Evidence of emotional support during difficult times

How to evidence this:

- Appointment letters
- School reports mentioning wellbeing
- Communication logs with teachers, SENCO, GP, health visitor, etc.

Show Positive Education & Development

- School attendance
- Engagement with homework, reading
- Participation in clubs or activities

How to evidence this:

- School attendance records
- Certificates, homework logs, messages from teachers
- Photos of activities (e.g. sports, art, hobbies)

Demonstrate a Safe, stable environment

Professionals value routine, consistency, and structure.

How to evidence this:

- Visual routines (bedtime charts, morning checklists)
- Safety measures at home (baby gates, locked medication, smoke alarms)
- Photos of their bedroom/play area showing safety

Evidence of Emotional Connection and Bonding

- Photos of shared activities (parks, reading, family time)
- Examples of celebrating achievements or milestones
- Notes from school or nursery recognising strong parent-child relationships



Keep Records of Communication

Maintain clear records showing cooperation with professionals:

- Emails with school, GP, social workers, nursery
- Notes from meetings
- Messages confirming actions you've taken (e.g., raising concerns, attending appointments)
- This shows you're engaged, responsible, and proactive

Demonstrate Insight & Reflective Parenting

- Professionals value parents who can reflect on what their child needs and how they adapt

Examples:

- "I noticed they were struggling with bedtime, so I introduced a visual routine"
- "I've booked extra sessions with the GP because I was concerned about their sleep"
- These statements show insight, responsiveness, and emotional attunement

Input from Others

If it's appropriate and safe, positive observations from:

- School
- Health visitor
- GP
- Childminder
- Clubs / activity leaders
- Family support workers

Keep a Parenting Log (Simple & Effective)

A short daily or weekly log including:

- Meals
- Activities
- School notes
- Emotions or behaviours you supported
- Any health matters
- This can be especially valuable if you're dealing with professionals

Stay Calm and Child-Focused

If someone is questioning your parenting, the strongest response is:

- Clear evidence
- Calm communication
- Consistent behaviour
- A focus on the child's wellbeing, not defending yourself emotionally
- Professionals respond extremely well to calm, organised parents who provide facts



HOW TO GUIDE

Support your child when they come home distressed after contact

It's really hard when your child comes home distressed after contact with their other parent — and the way you support them in those moments can make a huge difference to how safe and settled they feel. Here's a calm, practical, child-centred approach grounded in what professionals typically recommend.

Below are steps you can use straight away, plus some gentle longer-term strategies.

Regulate yourself first

- Children mirror the emotional state of the adult in front of them

Before engaging:

- Take a breath
- Keep your tone warm and slow
- Stay non-reactive
- Don't ask too many questions too quickly. This helps your child feel safe enough to talk

Reconnect with a soft, nurturing welcome

When they walk in the door, aim for connection before correction or questioning. This helps their nervous system settle.

- Offer a cuddle (if they want it)
- Sit together quietly
- Offer a snack
- Use a soft tone:
“I'm glad you're home. I missed you”

Name the feelings for them

Children often don't know how to articulate distress. You can model emotional vocabulary in a gentle, non-leading way:

- “You look a bit wobbly. Is it feeling like a big-change day?”
- “Coming home after a different routine can feel strange”

- “I wonder if you're feeling tired or overwhelmed?”
- You're not asking why — just helping them label feelings

Don't push for explanations

- Children often fear that talking about the other parent will cause conflict, guilt, or loyalty tension

Instead of:

- “What happened?”
- “Did Mum/ Dad upset you?”

Try:

- “You don't have to explain anything right now. I'm here when you're ready”

This builds trust and safety.

Offer calming regulation activities

Depending on your child's age, you can try:

- A favourite snack or drink
- A cosy blanket and quiet time
- Drawing or colouring
- A predictable routine (bath → pyjamas → story)
- Playing with sensory toys
- Going for a walk
- Watching something gentle
- These help their body settle before they process emotions

Create a predictable 'return home' routine

Many children struggle with the transition between homes. A predictable routine like this may help:

- Welcome + quiet reconnect
- Snack or drink
- Calm activity
- Gradual return to normal routines



Create a predictable 'return home' routine (continued)

- A visual timetable so your child knows their meals time / bedtime / homework time
- Simple pictures and words with "house rules" such as kind hands
- Predictability = safety

Validate the emotion, even if you don't know the cause

- Validation makes children feel understood and less alone

Examples:

- "It's okay to feel angry/sad/confused after a big change"
- "I'm right here. You're safe now"
- "Your feelings make sense"

Avoid:

- Dismissing ("You're fine")
- Minimising ("It's not a big deal")
- Blaming ("You always come home like this!")

Keep the conversation open

Later, when they are calmer, you can invite gentle reflection:

- "You seemed upset earlier. Do you want to talk about it now?"

- "I'm always here to listen — today, tomorrow, whenever you're ready"
- Children talk when they feel safe, not when we ask

Observe patterns

Keep an eye on:

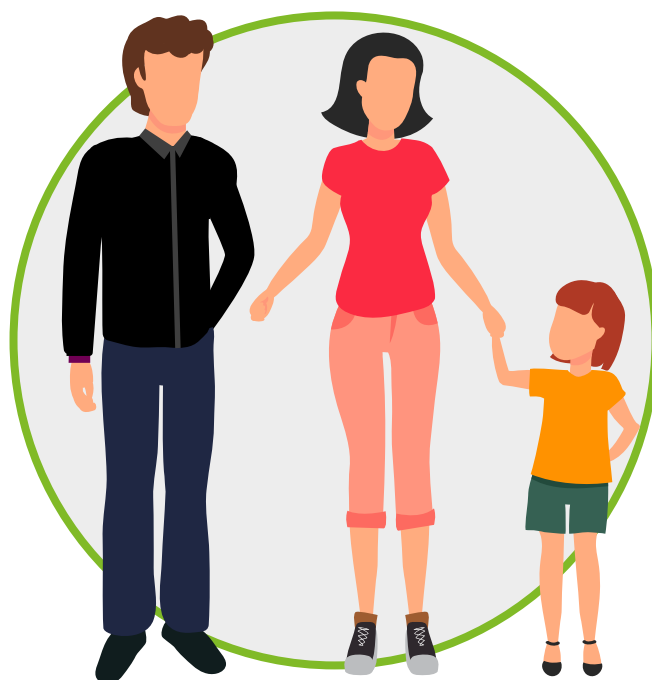
- What times they get emotional
- What triggers seem to be present
- Whether it happens every time or only sometimes
- Changes in sleep, appetite, behaviour, or anxiety
- This gives you helpful insight, especially if you ever need to speak to school or professionals

Keep things child-focused when talking about the other parent

Children need to know it's safe to talk about both parents.

You can say:

- "It's okay to love Mum / Dad and still feel upset sometimes"
- "You can talk about anything with me — I won't get cross"
- This protects the child from loyalty conflicts



HOW TO GUIDE

Support yourself while your children are away

You are not to blame for the abuse that you and your child/ren were subjected to.

You are responsible for ensuring your children are safe and cared for in your home. This includes protecting your children from your feelings about the abusive parent.

This may feel unfair and raw that you are in the situation you are and having to deal with courts and professionals and who knows what else.

This is unfair, it was not your fault, however, it is your responsibility to move forward and protect your child/ren.

Although it is difficult, it is important to accept that this is who the ex-partner is, they are not going to change, you cannot change them, you can only change your responses to them.

It makes complete sense that you feel worried and nervous when your children are away — especially if transitions are already emotionally challenging. Your feelings are a sign of how deeply you care. What matters most is how you take care of yourself during that time, so you can be calm, grounded, and emotionally available when they return.

Here's a supportive, research-informed, and very practical plan to help you feel more settled and confident while they're with their other parent.

Normalise your feelings

Worry often comes from:

- Lack of control
- Changes in routine
- Concern for your child's emotional state
- Past experiences
- Co-parenting difficulties

These feelings don't mean you're doing anything wrong — they mean you're attuned and

protective.

Create a 'Grounding Transition' for yourself too

Just like your child needs a routine before and after handover, you benefit from one as well.

Try creating a short ritual once they leave:

- Make a cup of tea
- Put on calming music
- Take 5 deep breaths
- Say to yourself: "They are safe. I am safe. This time will pass"

A tiny ritual signals safety to your body.

Plan the time intentionally (instead of letting worry fill it)

- One practical task
- One enjoyable activity
- One rest moment
- Even simple things help: a walk, a favourite show, reading, a hot bath, meeting a friend for an hour

You don't need to be "productive" — just gently engaged.

Use calming techniques that truly work

Name:

- 5 things you see
- 4 things you can touch
- 3 things you hear
- 2 things you smell
- 1 thing you taste

This prevents your mind spiralling.

Box breathing

- Breathe in for 4 → Hold for 4 → Out for 4 → Hold for 4
- Repeat 3-5 times

Worry container

Write your worries down in a notebook so they leave your head. Give Yourself Permission Not to Be “On Alert.”

Parents often feel they must stay emotionally “ready” in case something happens. But you deserve rest too.

Try telling yourself:

- “I am allowed to relax”
- “It’s okay for this time to be for me”
- “Being rested helps me be a better parent when they come home”

Your nervous system will start to listen if you repeat this often enough.

Create a positive “return routine” so you feel prepared

Knowing what you’ll do when they return takes away uncertainty.

Something like:

- Soft welcome (no questions)
- Snack and reconnection
- Calm activity
- Normal routine

Having this plan ready can ease your anxiety because you know exactly how you’ll handle whatever emotions they bring home.

Stay in your window of tolerance

Worry narrows your emotional space. You stay in your “best self” zone by:

- Eating regularly
- Drinking water
- Getting sleep when you can
- Avoiding too much caffeine or scrolling

- Taking fresh air
- Talking to supportive friends/family

These sound simple, but they keep your nervous system steady.

Talk to yourself the way you talk to your child

Use the same nurturing tone with yourself:

- “It’s okay to feel this way”
- “I’m doing my best”
- “This will pass”
- “I am a loving, safe parent”

Self-compassion makes you calmer and more emotionally available later.

If helpful, limit your imagination from filling in gaps

When children are away, the mind tends to create scenarios — usually negative. Remind yourself:

- Worry is not evidence
- The visit is temporary
- You can only control your own home environment
- You are the stability they return to

This returns power to you.

Have a “Support Plan” for yourself

This might include:

- A friend you can message
- A task that distracts you
- A comforting film or activity
- A walk or fresh air
- Journalling your thoughts

You don’t need to do all of these — just one or two.

Journalling can be a helpful way to release and organise your thoughts by putting them onto paper rather than holding them in your mind. You might also find it useful to write a letter expressing your feelings — not to send, but simply as a way of processing what you need to say.

Take some time to identify the people who can offer you genuine, steady support. Think about who you can speak to openly without them reinforcing your frustrations, and who can provide a calm, reliable listening ear when you need it most.

Plan enjoyable activities for yourself while the children are with their other parent. This can help you manage feelings of worry and allow you to feel refreshed and emotionally prepared for their return.

HOW TO GUIDE

Evidence your concerns

It makes complete sense that you feel concerned — when your instincts tell you something may not be right, it's important to take those feelings seriously while staying calm, factual, and child focused.

Below is a clear, structured guide to the kinds of evidence that are typically helpful to gather if you are worried about your children's safety with an ex partner.

Nothing here assumes anything bad is happening — this is about protecting your children and yourself by being organised, factual, and prepared.

Record your child's behaviour before and after contact

Professionals take behaviour changes very seriously.

Look for patterns in:

- Distress (crying, fear, clinginess)
- Anger or withdrawal
- Regression (bedwetting, sleep problems, tantrums)
- Changes in eating or sleeping
- Unusual comments
- Expressing fear or confusion

Useful evidence:

- A simple diary/log (dates, times, what happened, how long it lasted)
- Screenshots of messages reporting concerns to professionals
- Notes from school noticing changes

Keep it factual, short, non-emotive.

Keep a Contact Log

Note:

- Exact handover times
- Whether she/ he was late or changed plans
- Any concerning behaviour you observed
- What your child said or how they behaved
- Condition of the children (hungry, unwashed, tired, inappropriate clothing)

Gather any physical evidence related to safety

This is not about searching your child's body — it's about noting what you observe.

Such as:

- Injuries (bruises, scratches) the child discloses
- Scruffy appearance if unusual
- Clothing not appropriate for weather
- Items missing or broken

Evidence:

- Photos (date-stamped if possible)
- Notes on what your child said about injuries
- Emails to school/GP seeking advice

Keep records of health or medical concerns

Examples:

- Missed medication
- Return from contact unwell with no explanation
- Child reporting lack of sleep, food, hygiene





Evidence:

- GP appointment notes
- Health visitor or school nurse comments
- Written communication with your ex notifying them about medical needs

Capture anything school or professionals notice

- Schools often see patterns such as:
- Tiredness
- Anxiety
- Behavioural changes
- Disclosure of worries
- Physical signs of neglect

Useful evidence:

- Emails from teachers
- Pastoral notes
- SENCO/DSL observations
- Logged concerns from school staff

Professionals’ observations carry significant weight.

Save all communication from your ex-partner

Especially if the relationship was abusive.

Keep:

- Texts, emails, WhatsApp messages
- Voicemails or recorded calls (if legally allowed in your area)
- Social media messages

Look for:

- Aggression, threats or manipulation
- Attempts to control or intimidate
- Refusal to follow agreed arrangements
- Ignoring medical/educational needs

Evidence:

- Screenshots
- Exported chat histories
- A timeline of behaviour

Document any concerns the children verbally disclose

Children may say things indirectly, such as:

- “I didn’t like it when...”
- “They shouted at me / scared me / left me alone...”
- “I’m scared to go”
- “I don’t want to stay overnight”

How to record this safely:

- Write exactly what they said, word for word
- Include date/time
- Do NOT question them — just listen
- Do NOT ask leading questions (this protects credibility)

Track the impact on day-to-day life

Professionals look at function — how contact affects your child’s wellbeing.

Examples to record:

- Disrupted sleep
- Anxiety before handovers
- Emotional distress after contact
- Changes in school performance
- Increased behavioural issues

A clear pattern over time is powerful evidence.

Record any concerning behaviour from your ex-partner

This is about patterns, not isolated incidents.

Examples:

- Failure to return children on time
- Turning up unannounced
- Breaching boundaries
- Refusing to communicate about the children
- Using the children as messengers
- Blaming or criticising you in front of them

Evidence:

- Your log
- Screenshots
- Emails from professionals
- Third party witness statements (if available)

Keep records of every step you've taken to protect your children

This shows that you are:

- Proactive
- Reasonable

- Child focused
- Seeking safe solutions

This can include:

- Contacting school/GP for advice
- Seeking mediation (if safe)
- Asking for support from family services
- Documenting concerns factually
- Following advice from professionals

What NOT to do

To keep everything credible and safe:

- Don't interrogate your child
- Don't coach or lead their answers
- Don't express fear or panic toward them
- Don't discuss adult issues with them
- Don't confront your ex directly about allegations

Stick to calm, factual recording.



Scenarios – What would you do?



Your children arrive back to your house late, tired and hungry. They are really grumpy and snappy towards you.

Do you?



Shout at the other parent they are late and disrespectful, and they need to be on time in the future. Let the children know that the parent is useless and should have fed them, and this is what they are always like.

Call the other parent and let them know that not feeding the children is unacceptable. Make sure the children are clear that they cannot speak to you like that, and they are behaving just like the other parent. Rant to a friend while the children are in earshot.



Focus on the children and welcome them back and go onto the app to record when the children arrived and how late this was. Casually ask the children if they had a nice weekend (without numerous follow up questions) and give them a hug and a meal or a snack.

Record on the app that the children seemed very hungry and hadn't eaten. Ignore the children's behaviour and settle down together to watch TV or play a game and decompress. Speak to a friend later and express your frustration when the children are asleep.



The other parent is due to collect the child from your parent's house (your trusted person) but asks that you take the child to their house instead. You have a court ordered parenting plan that states the other parent has to pick the children up at the required location.

Do you?



You agree to drive the children to the other parents' house.



Stick to the plan and say you won't be changing the pre-arranged plans. Record the outcome on the parenting app. State that if the children are not collected at the specified location, they will come back to your house for the weekend.



Argue with the other parent in front of the children, stating they are useless parent and can't be trusted to do anything.



Conclusion

Parenting after domestic abuse can be VERY difficult, elements will not feel comfortable or fair, however you need to manage these feelings and the emotions surrounding this. This is an opportunity to model emotional regulation to your children.

You will need to be clear with your children about not sharing specific information with the other parent, try to keep this to a minimum as it is not reasonable to expect children to be able to keep secrets.

The focus MUST be on the child/ren and what is best for their wellbeing.

Support Services & Resources

Often, where people have experienced domestic abuse they have been isolated and don't have people to turn to – you may want to consider services including:

The Peacock Project

Domestic abuse support service for anyone over 16 in Peterborough

☎ 01733 894964

✉ referrals@wa-support.co.uk

www.peterboroughwomensaid.co.uk

The National Domestic Abuse Helpline

☎ 0808 2000 247

www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk

Cambridge Helpline

☎ 01223 245888

Peterborough Helpline

☎ 01733 511250

Sexual Assault Referral Centre

☎ 0800 193 5434

www.theelmssarc.org

Domestic Abuse Support Service (DASS)

If you live in Cambridgeshire and you would like to access support

☎ 0300 373 1073

✉ DASSreferrals@impakt.org.uk

www.impakt.org.uk/domestic-abuse

Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Partnership

www.cambsdasv.org.uk

Home Office Domestic Abuse pages

www.gov.uk/guidance/domestic-abuse-how-to-get-help

National Helplines:

Samaritans ☎ 116 123

Lifeline ☎ 0808 808 2121 • 11am – 11pm

www.keeptyourhead.com

Information on mental health and wellbeing for children, young people, adults, professionals and schools across Cambridgeshire & Peterborough

<https://www.frazzledcafe.org/>

Providing a safe, confidential, and non-judgmental online (and some in-person) community for people overwhelmed by modern life

If the abuse is persisting, you can contact domestic abuse support services and helplines

www.cambsdasv.org.uk.

Please call the Police if there are breaches of a non-molestation order or bail conditions.



[The Parallel Parenting Solution: Eliminate Conflict With Your Ex, Create The Life You Want Book by CARL. KNICKERBOCKER](#)

For Children: [My Boundary Balloons: A Children's Book to Help Teach Kids Emotional Boundaries, Empathy & Emotional Intelligence \(Ages 5-7\)](#)

Book by Juliette Tyra



[Think Like a Detective: A Kid's Guide to Critical Thinking \(Adventures in Thinking\)](#)

Book by David Pakman



Lived Experience Children's voices



When my father took my mum to court, the involvement of CAFCASS and Social Services caused far more trauma for me, my brother, and my mum.

We had stopped seeing my father after he physically hurt me, threw me out of his house at nine years old, and left me to walk home barefoot for over two miles.

Despite my mum having photos of my injuries, the police and social services only saw me a week later and said the marks had faded, so nothing was done. My brother and I genuinely feared him.

My mum tried to protect us, but my father made life extremely difficult. He would turn up at our house and my grandparent's house shouting and banging on the doors, and he even went to my school telling lies. I struggled with my emotions and, although I loved my mum and brother, my anger came out towards them.

When my father took my mum to court, we already had a social worker because of my behaviour. Instead of listening to me, she repeatedly told me my father had only made a mistake and deserved another chance. CAFCASS said the same, often bringing up my young stepsister, whom I missed. I felt ignored, and my distress became worse. My behaviour escalated, the police became involved, and despite my mum trying to help me, no support was provided.

At court, none of what I had told CAFCASS or the social worker was taken into account. They ordered that I live with my father, even though I had not seen him and was terrified of him. I was forced into a car kicking and screaming. After only six days—during which I was constantly overwhelmed and distressed—he took me back to my mum's at midnight, shouting that he could not cope with me.

Despite this, social services still insisted it might not be safe for me to remain at home, even though my mum begged them to help us and said I needed support, including assessment for ADHD and autism. They ignored her concerns. I was taken into care, moved through multiple foster homes, and eventually placed in a children's home. At 15, the court ordered permanent foster care.

Years later, college recognised my struggles and referred me for assessment. I was diagnosed with autism and ADHD, and with medication and understanding, I can now manage my emotions.

I believe that if social services and CAFCASS had listened—to me and to my mum—our family would not have been torn apart, and much of the harm could have been prevented. Children who express fear of a parent must be believed, and contact should never be forced”.

Peterborough young person



When I went through the family court process I was 8 years old. I had decided I didn't want to see my father because he treated me aggressively and was violent. When we came to the realisation that it wouldn't be safe for me to continue seeing him, he decided to take my mother to court.

Upon hearing this I was worried as I knew that I may have to go back to having contact with my father and therefore go back to feeling unsafe. In court my father claimed that my mother had alienated me from him even though I went to her originally and told her how my dad was making me feel. However, the family court didn't only not listen to me they didn't listen to her either.

This left me feeling unheard and also left my mum feeling like it was her fault that I had to go back to seeing my dad as if she hadn't done enough to try and protect me.

I went back to seeing him for over 3 years in which his behaviour started off better but gradually worsened to where I could see him getting angry again and made me feel uncomfortable.

When I was 13 I made the decision to stop seeing him again but due to the previous court order I had to still go and see him for 6 weeks where he knew that I was trying to not see him again.

The last time I saw him he initiated a conversation about the court. I decided to record this conversation as I knew I should have proof of what he said. This conversation was extremely alarming and scary and I felt like I had to listen and record due to the fact that the court didn't listen to me the first time. That was the last time I had contact with him and my wellbeing has improved massively. I feel this could have happened 3 years prior if I had the courts backing the first time".

Cambridgeshire young person aged 17





Guidance for how to parent with an abusive ex-partner

