

## Factsheet

For single parents in England and Wales **May 2017**

Freephone

**0808 802 0925**

Gingerbread Single Parent Helpline

## Getting legal help

There are some situations when it is important to get legal help and advice. Some examples could be if you are separating and need to sort out finances, if you could lose your home through repossession or eviction, or if either you or your child is in danger or at risk of being harmed.

If you need legal advice it should always be given by a qualified person who has professional liability insurance, but it can be difficult to know how to find this help.

Some services are free and some will charge. It is important to check this before you receive advice. Public funding for legal costs is known as legal aid. It has become more difficult to get legal aid, and it only covers certain types of legal problems. You generally need to be on a low income to qualify.

The Gingerbread Single Parent Helpline cannot give legal advice, but this factsheet gives you details of organisations that can give legal advice or help you find it.

The list of agencies that can provide advice and the help to pay for it changes often; this factsheet is correct as of May 2017.

The Family Mediation Council have produced a guide called '**When do I need to go to court?**' This can help you to decide if you will need to go to court, or can avoid the court process completely. [www.familymediationcouncil.org.uk/family-mediation/need-go-court](http://www.familymediationcouncil.org.uk/family-mediation/need-go-court).

## Sources of support and advice

### Using a solicitor

The guide '**Using a solicitor**' by the Law Society provides information on how to choose a solicitor, the questions to ask and how to prepare for a meeting with them. This can be found on the **Law Society website** or you can call 0207 320 5650 to request a copy.

Solicitors can help with all kinds of legal matters but it's important to find one who is experienced in the area of law you need help with.

### Employers, trade unions and insurance policies

You could be entitled to free legal advice from an employee assistance programme or a trade union. These can sometimes offer help with legal fees, or provide a telephone helpline service. You should also check any insurance policies (such as car or household) in case they include free legal advice.

## Representing yourself

It is becoming increasingly difficult to get help with the cost of legal advice, which means more people have to complete court forms without the help of a solicitor or represent themselves in court. This can be a challenging and daunting experience. Below you will find links to useful resources that may help.

For general information about going to court, and an overview of the court system, see the guide '**Going to court**' by the judiciary of England and Wales.

This can be found on [www.judiciary.gov.uk](http://www.judiciary.gov.uk).

## **Contact arrangements**

**Advicenow** provide useful information on the court process for resolving contact arrangements and financial agreements between you and your child's other parent, including guides to using the courts without a lawyer.

[www.advicenow.org.uk](http://www.advicenow.org.uk)

## **Finances**

The **Family Justice Council** has a guide to sorting out finances during divorce.

[www.judiciary.gov.uk](http://www.judiciary.gov.uk)

**Advicenow** has a number of resources on finances including a guide on applying for a financial order without the help of a lawyer, and a guide to sorting out your finances when you get divorced.

[www.advicenow.org.uk](http://www.advicenow.org.uk)

## **Representing yourself in court**

Representing yourself in court is often known as being a 'litigant in person'. As it is becoming more common, there are guides to help you through the process:

The **Ministry of Justice** has produced some short videos for parents representing themselves in mediation sessions and in the courts, **available here**.

**Advicenow** has produced a video guide to representing yourself in family court which includes tips on how to best put across your case.

[www.advicenow.org.uk](http://www.advicenow.org.uk)

**Rights of Women** has produced a guide called 'Children and the law: the Family Court Process' which provides an overview of the family court process so that you know what to expect.

[www.rightsofwomen.org.uk](http://www.rightsofwomen.org.uk)

The **Child Law Advice** service has a guide to attending court. It runs through the court process and the different hearings you might have to attend and includes example court papers.

<http://childlawadvice.org.uk>

**Merseyside Family Justice Council** has advice specifically to help those who have cases relating to their children, such as contact and residence. It can be used by anyone in England and Wales. They also provide advice for self-represented parties in financial hearings who have cases relating to finances after the breakdown of a marriage or civil partnership. Both guides can be found online at: [www.mfjc.co.uk](http://www.mfjc.co.uk)

## **McKenzie friends**

A McKenzie friend is a person who can help you at court if you're representing yourself. He or she could be an actual friend, or someone who has been through a similar situation. A McKenzie friend can even be a solicitor or barrister who is helping you. There are professional McKenzie friends, but be careful to get a recommendation as they may not have any legal training and will not have indemnity insurance if things go wrong.

For more information on McKenzie friends see the Family Division's guidance on McKenzie Friends **here**.

## **Personal Support Unit**

The Personal Support Unit has volunteers who assist people who are going through the courts without representation. See [www.thepsu.org.uk](http://www.thepsu.org.uk) for a list of units throughout the country.

## **Useful organisations**

### **Advicenow (web only)**

[www.advicenow.org.uk](http://www.advicenow.org.uk)

An independent, not for profit website, run by Law for Life: The Foundation for Public Legal Education, which has lots of information on your rights and the law.

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### **Bar Pro Bono Unit**

**020 7092 3960**

[www.barprobono.org.uk](http://www.barprobono.org.uk)

Barristers who can give free advice and representation in any court or tribunal in England or Wales. You cannot refer yourself, but the website explains how to access the scheme.

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### **Civil Legal Advice**

**0345 345 4345**

[www.gov.uk/civil-legal-advice](http://www.gov.uk/civil-legal-advice)

Assess your eligibility for legal aid and signpost to local sources of help.

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### **Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner**

[www.gov.uk/find-an-immigration-adviser](http://www.gov.uk/find-an-immigration-adviser)

You can find an immigration adviser through the Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner website. The search function also allows you to search for advisers who don't charge a fee.

### **Law Centres Network**

**020 3637 1330** (this is not an advice line)

[www.lawcentres.org.uk](http://www.lawcentres.org.uk)

Law centres are staffed by legal workers, including some solicitors and barristers. They can give initial legal advice and can sometimes take on your case. They generally don't deal with separation or family work. You can check on the website if there is a law centre near you, and what areas of law they cover.

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### **Law Society**

**0207 320 5650**

[www.lawsociety.org.uk](http://www.lawsociety.org.uk)

Visit the Law Society website to find a solicitor in your area.

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### **The Free Representation Unit**

**020 7611 9555**

[www.thefru.org.uk](http://www.thefru.org.uk)

A charity that provides legal advice. They also offer case preparation and advocacy in employment, social security and some criminal injury compensation cases.

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### **Citizens Advice Bureau**

**03444 111 444** (England)

**03444 77 20 20** (Wales)

[www.citizensadvice.org.uk](http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk)

Find information and advice on a wide range of issues including the court system and your legal rights as a parent.

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### **Child Law Advice**

[www.childlawadvice.org.uk](http://www.childlawadvice.org.uk)

Child Law Advice is operated by Coram Children's Legal Centre. Specialist advice and information on child, family and education law. Applicable only in England.

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### **Disability Law Service**

**020 7791 9800**

[www.dls.org.uk](http://www.dls.org.uk)

Free legal advice and representation for disabled people and their families, carers and enablers on a range of issues.

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### **Family Rights Group**

**0808 801 0366**

[www.frg.org.uk](http://www.frg.org.uk)

Advises parents and other family members whose children are involved with or require children's social care services. The charity provides confidential advice to those living in England and Wales.

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### **Resolution**

**01689 820272**

[www.resolution.org.uk](http://www.resolution.org.uk)

Association of solicitors specialising in family law, who adopt a collaborative approach to family problems. Resolution can provide a list of local solicitors. The website contains free information on issues such as splitting up, parenting apart and child maintenance.

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### **Rights of Women**

**020 7251 6577** (Family law)

**020 7251 8887** (Criminal law)

**020 7608 1137** (For women in London)

**020 7490 7689** (Immigration and asylum law)

[www.rightsofwomen.org.uk](http://www.rightsofwomen.org.uk)

Free, confidential legal advice by telephone for women on a wide variety of issues. Specialist areas include family law, lesbian parenting, separation, children/contact issues and domestic violence.

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### **Shelter**

**Freephone 0808 800 4444**

[www.shelter.org.uk](http://www.shelter.org.uk)

Gives details of local housing advice centres throughout the country and provides information and advice on a range of housing issues.

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### **Family Law Panel**

[thefamilylawpanel.org](http://thefamilylawpanel.org)

A free directory service for members of the public to access professional and independent family law information. Solicitors and/or mediators offer an initial free advice session and provide tailored support and signposting thereafter. Professionals who can offer support with Domestic Violence are listed with a purple ribbon next to their name.

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## Further help and information

**Gingerbread  
Single Parent Helpline**  
Freephone 0808 802 0925  
[www.gingerbread.org.uk](http://www.gingerbread.org.uk)

Provides free, confidential advice for single parents. No matter the challenge – around your finances, contact arrangements or help you could receive – our trained advisers are here with tailored advice that works for you.

**One Parent Families Scotland  
Lone Parent Helpline**  
Freephone 0808 801 0323  
[www.opfs.org.uk](http://www.opfs.org.uk)

Run by our partner organisation, One Parent Families Scotland, the Lone Parent Helpline provides free, confidential advice and information for single parents in Scotland.

### More from Gingerbread

The following related Gingerbread factsheets for single parents are also available:

- > [Making arrangements for your children](#)
- > [Help when you can't agree](#)
- > [Action to take when a relationship ends](#)

Download them from our [website](#) or call 0207 428 5420 to request them.

### Become a Gingerbread member

Membership is available to single parents in England and Wales. Join a community of thousands of single parents who benefit from mutual support, free advice and information. You can also meet other single parents at one of our local support groups.

Visit our [website](#), call 020 7428 5424 or email [membership@gingerbread.org.uk](mailto:membership@gingerbread.org.uk)

**Gingerbread**  
Single parents, equal families

Gingerbread, the charity for single parent families, is registered in England and Wales as a company limited by guarantee, no. 402748, and a registered charity, no. 230750. The Gingerbread Single Parent Helpline is supported by the Department for Education, HMRC, The Big Lottery and other funders and is accredited by the Helplines Partnership.

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

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