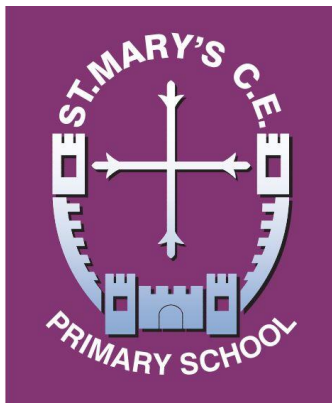


Separated Parents/Carers Policy



St Mary's Church of England VA School, Saffron Walden

'Let your light shine... as you grow', (inspired by Matthew 5: 15-16)

Our vision is: 'We nurture our pupils to be the best they can be in every way - in an inclusive and supportive environment, rooted in Christian teachings.'

This policy aims to set out how St Mary's C of E School will work with families, in the best interests of children in the circumstances of parental separation. This policy is subject to, and should be read together with, the school's Child Protection Policy which details how the school will deal with any safeguarding concerns that may arise.

We acknowledge and understand that family breakdown can be a difficult and emotional time for parents and children. The school is committed to supporting and assisting families at this difficult time, in a way which promotes the best interests of the children involved. This policy sets out how we will approach issues in the context of parental separation, what the school expects from parents in these circumstances, and signposts parents to appropriate resources to assist them in dealing with separation.

The Role of the School

The school is subject to a number of legal duties when interacting with families, including those who are separating or have separated. The school must give paramount consideration to the welfare of the child or children involved. This means that the school's primary obligation must be to the child, even where this conflicts with the views of one parent or the other. The obligation on schools continues even when family circumstances change, for example, when relationships between parents break down.

It is generally in the best interests of children if parents and schools can work together. Schools have a legal duty to work in partnership with families and to involve parents. In this context, the term "parent" includes not only those with parental responsibility under the law, but also those who have care of children but do not have parental responsibility. Schools are under an obligation to treat parents equally and remain neutral unless there is a lawful basis, such as a court order, which is provided to the school and requires the school to do otherwise. As

a result, the school will not be in a position, for example, to act on the request of one parent to exclude the other from school activities or communications, absent a court order to that effect being provided to the school. Equally, this does not mean that the school is obliged to inform both parents of communication with the other parent, although the school will always endeavour to maintain a neutral and balanced stance between separated parents, while seeking to avoid becoming involved in any conflict. Any information shared by either parent with the school will be treated with appropriate sensitivity and confidentiality by the school.

Overall, the priority will be to protect and promote the welfare of pupils, while remaining neutral and non-judgmental in relation to the adults involved.

Our Expectations of Parents

In the circumstances of parental separation, schools play a very important role. At a time when children are often experiencing uncertainty and change, school is a consistent factor in their lives. It is very important that children's attendance at school is maintained at these times.

It is the responsibility of parents to keep the school informed of important events that are happening at home, such as communications to the child that the parents are separating, when a physical separation is occurring and, where relevant, of any court proceedings that may involve the child. This is so that we can consider how to best meet any additional needs that the child may present at these times. The school must also be kept promptly informed of any changes in contact details and of arrangements for collecting of children from school.

Dealing with Disagreements between Parents

We expect that parents will respect the school's position in the circumstances of parental separation, as set out above, and accept that where possible the school must avoid being drawn into disputes between parents. In the event that a disagreement arises between parents that involves the school, we will seek to resolve this through discussion with the parents and a member of the Senior Leadership Team. However, the school has no role in issues which do not involve the school, or in arbitrating disagreements between parents. In the event of a dispute which cannot be resolved by discussion, parents will be advised to consider mediation, alternative dispute resolution or an application to the Family Court. Parents are referred to the HMCTS Guidance for separated parents, which addresses the options available in these circumstances (see Resources, below).

Name Changes

The school is obliged to register all children by their legal name in the admissions register. In the event that a parent wishes to change the surname by which their child is originally registered or is known at the school, that parent will need to demonstrate that the child's name has been legally changed.

School trips and other activities requiring consent

Where consent is required for a child to attend a school trip or other activity requiring parental consent, such consent will initially be sought from both parents where the school has been informed that they are separated or separating and both parents have indicated a wish to be consulted by the school. Parents are encouraged to reach agreement on such issues, which is likely to be the interests of the child concerned.

Attendance at Events and Parent's Evenings

Parents will be expected to reach agreement in relation to attendance at school events and parents evenings. Absent a court order, the school cannot determine which parent is allowed in to attend at school events. [Where necessary and subject to resources, the school will give consideration to arranging separate parent's evenings for separated parents.]

Collection from School

When a child is initially registered at the school, parents are required to confirm who is permitted to collect the child from school. In the event that changes are sought to this arrangement, for example such that one parent will collect the child on certain days and the other parent will collect the child on other days, the school will need to be informed either of an agreement between the parent to this effect, or a court order.

In such circumstances, where a parent who is not due to have the child on the relevant day attends for collection, the other parent will be contacted in order to ensure that they are in agreement with the arrangement. If the parent to whom the child would normally be released agrees, the child may be released. If the parent opposes the other parent collecting the child, the school will advise that without a court order we cannot prevent them from doing so. In the event that the parent to whom the child would normally be released to cannot be reached, a member of the Senior Leadership Team will make a decision based upon all relevant information available at the time. During any discussion or communication with parents, the child will be supervised by an appropriate member of school staff in a separate room. In extreme circumstances, if there is a belief that a possible abduction of the child may occur or if the parent is disruptive, the police and local authority may be notified immediately.

Resources

Parental separation can be very difficult for the children involved, particularly where there is a high level of acrimony to which the children are exposed. Parents are signposted to the following resources which may assist in dealing with the effects of separation:

- NSPCC *Guidance on separation and divorce* - <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/support-for-parents/separation-and-divorce/>
- CAFCASS guide to *Parenting Together* – <https://www.cafcass.gov.uk/grown-ups/parents-and-carers/divorce-and-separation/parenting-together/>
- HMCTS *Guidance for Separated Parents* - <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guide-for-separated-parents-children-and-the-family-courts-cb7/guide-for-separated-parents-children-and-the-family-courts-cb7>.
- Department for Education *Guidance on Understanding and Dealing with issues relating to parental responsibility* - <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dealing-with-issues-relating-to-parental-responsibility/understanding-and-dealing-with-issues-relating-to-parental-responsibility>.

Interpretation

In case of any disagreement as to the interpretation of this policy, regard will be had to the Department for Education *Guidance on Understanding and Dealing with issues relating to parental responsibility*. The school may also take advice and guidance from the Local Authority. In any particular case, the school will apply the law and act in accordance with the welfare of the relevant child, which will be our primary consideration at all times.

Monitoring and Review

The Senior Leadership Team will familiarise themselves with this policy and ensure all Staff, Governors and Volunteers are aware of the procedures to follow should the need occur. The policy will be made available to parents and published on our school website.

This policy will be reviewed every two years by the Senior Leadership Team.

The scheduled review date for this policy is February 2026