



An Australian Government Initiative



A New Family Law System

Family Relationship Centres

Maintaining a healthy relationship and being a good parent can be a challenge. These difficulties can increase when parents separate. Everyone needs help and advice on relationships from time to time, so in the next three years, the Government will establish a new network of 65 Family Relationship Centres across Australia.

These centres will be a first port of call when people need help to make their relationships stronger or when relationships end.

Q. How will the centres help me?

Family Relationship Centres will be a central point in the community where couples, mothers, fathers, grandparents and children can all go to get help, advice and support.

- If you're **about to be married**, you can get information about pre-marriage education, giving your marriage a sound start.
- If you want to **improve your relationship**, you will be able to get information about family relationship education and other services that can help strengthen relationships.
- If you're having **relationship difficulties**, you can get information and assistance in accessing services that help to prevent separation.
- If you're a **separated parent**, you can get help to resolve disputes and reach agreement on parenting arrangements. This will include information, advice and dispute resolution as well as help to access other services that you may need.
- If your **parenting arrangements** break down, or your court orders are breached, the centres will be a first port of call to help fix the problem outside the courts.





- If you are a **grandparent**, affected by a family separation, you will be able to use the services provided by the centres.
- If you **work with children, couples, parents or grandparents**, and you think they might benefit from advice or assistance, you can refer them to a centre.

If you can't get to a centre easily, there will also be a national telephone advice line and website to help you.

Q. Will I be charged for services?

Information, advice, one-on-one interviews and referrals to other services will all be free, as will the national advice line.

Up to three hours of joint dispute resolution sessions for separating couples with children will also be provided at the centres without charge.

If you need more than three hours of dispute resolution, you may be referred to another service or you may continue at the centre. Fees will only be charged if people can afford to pay. (It's worth noting that no matter the fee, it will probably be cheaper than going to court.)

Q. What will happen in cases of family violence or child abuse?

The centres will screen for family violence and child abuse. If this is identified, the centres will provide information on their options and refer people to support services, and to the courts if needed.

Q. Where will the new centres be located?

Over the next three years, centres will be established in every State and Territory in Australia. The first fifteen centres will be in:

- New South Wales – Lismore, Sutherland, Wollongong, and Penrith
- Victoria – Mildura, Sunshine, Frankston and Ringwood
- Queensland – Townsville and Strathpine
- Western Australia – Joondalup
- South Australia – Salisbury
- Tasmania – Hobart
- Northern Territory – Darwin
- Australian Capital Territory – Canberra

Q. When will the centres be open?

The first fifteen centres will be open by the middle of 2006. The remaining centres will be opened around Australia in the next three years*.

Q. Who will run and staff these centres?

The centres will be run by organisations with proven experience in helping families. The Government will be seeking applications for the first fifteen centres in October this year and will select the best organisations for the job.

The operators will ensure the centres are staffed by highly trained professionals that are capable of providing support and advice to assist parents in resolving disputes.

Q. What will the centres be like?

The centres will be family-friendly places that will be easy to get to. The Government is still finalising the details – please let us know if you have any thoughts about what you think the centres should be like by e-mailing familylawreforms@ag.gov.au or calling (02) 6234 4876.

Q. Do I have to go to one of these centres if I'm getting a divorce?

No. There is no requirement to go to a centre or seek dispute resolution before filing for divorce or when filing consent orders.

It is only where there is a dispute about a parenting issue and a person wishes to go to court to settle that dispute, that attendance at a dispute resolution process (such as mediation) will be compulsory. The dispute resolution can be provided at a Family Relationship Centre or from another accredited service.

Q. What will happen in the dispute resolution sessions?

The centres will encourage you and the other parent to discuss what is best for your children. They will help you work together to reach a practical agreement (or 'parenting plan') that meets your children's needs. The centres will use the best possible approach, such as mediation or parenting advice, to help resolve your situation in your children's best interests.

Q. Can I take my lawyer to dispute resolution at the centre?

No. It is not intended that lawyers take part in the dispute resolution process at Family Relationship Centres. You can take a support person but they cannot represent you or act as a lawyer during the process at the centre. Of course you can obtain advice from your lawyer before or after the process.

Q. Will my information be kept private?

Yes. Our information will be treated as confidential (except for information relating to child abuse). If you are referred to another service, you can give permission for your information to be sent to that service, to save you having to provide it again.



*Information about existing services across Australia that can help in the meantime is available at www.familylaw.gov.au or by calling **1800 050 321**.
