

# Acknowledgments

## LifeWorks

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# Letter from the sponsor

*The Child Support Agency (CSA) is delighted to be able to offer relationship educators this high quality resource. We have been particularly pleased to work closely with the community consortium of Lifeworks Relationship Counselling and Education Services, Stepfamily Association of Victoria Inc., Education Image Pty Ltd and Collaborative Action Research and Evaluation in its production.*

*Our sponsorship in developing this education resource reflects our vision that 'All Australian parents meet their child support responsibilities'. We recognise that in order to effectively support parents, consideration must be given to their full range of life experiences. Separating and repartnering are certainly 'key life experiences'.*

*Our experience in dealing with separated parents has shown that those starting a new relationship often face significant emotional, financial and legal challenges. These challenges affect parents' ability and capacity to meet their responsibilities and they bring these issues with them when dealing with CSA.*

*At the outset of the development of **Back on track**, community service providers emphasised the value of education to support parents entering new relationships. These services identified clear links with the benefits of an education resource to outcomes for children, new families and parental responsibilities.*

*As part of the Department of Family and Community Services, CSA takes an active role in helping to shape policies and strategies for stronger families and stronger communities. We continually look for opportunities to enhance community access and support for parents.*

*I hope that you, as community educators and counsellors, find this a valuable resource when delivering services to your local communities. I believe we can help build more resilient families which will create stronger communities for today and tomorrow.*




Catherine Argall  
General Manager  
Child Support Agency

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*Back on track: Finding a way through separation and repartnering* is an education program commissioned by the Child Support Agency (CSA) in response to concerns raised at the CSA Community Forum in 1997. Community service providers at that forum expressed frustration at the lack of education in repartnering, particularly resources that would be relevant and appealing to many separated parents.

*Back on track* was developed by people in organisations that are experienced in dealing with the difficult issues faced by families in communities. It brought together expertise in counselling and social work and focused attention on the issue of the break-up and re-forming of the family unit.

The people who wrote this resource are experienced in dealing with people as they separate and let go of a relationship, particularly where children are involved. In these pages, they share their experience and knowledge about the process of separating, healing and, in most cases, the decision and opportunity to form a new relationship.

Importantly, this resource was not developed in a closed office, based only on the experience of those working directly on the project; it involved a research phase which drew on the experience and advice of service providers across Australia. The research defined the requirements of those who could use this program and ensured that those requirements were met.

This has resulted in a program that provides information and background material on the key themes and issues surrounding separation and repartnering. Service providers can use this information as background in their counselling of individuals or for community information/ education sessions — whether there is a need for one-off sessions or a series of sessions.

*Back on track* is designed to allow the service provider to match content with the needs of the communities they work in. The relevance of the material for men was a particular consideration, given the feedback that much of the existing support infrastructure is either tailored to meet women's needs or alternatively does not appeal to men. It also recognises the importance of reaching both parents if the objective of sustainable new and old relationships is to be realised.

In recent times, CSA has been revising and revitalising its direction and the way it conducts its business. CSA fostered this program to demonstrate its commitment to working with the community in order to encourage and support parental responsibility.

The government's *Stronger Families and Communities Strategy*, launched in April 2000, specifically recognises the special needs of parents in meeting the challenge of building and strengthening their family relationships. The strategy includes a range of measures designed to support families and communities at a local level and emphasises partnerships between government, the community and the private sector.

The Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services administers the Family Relationships Services Program that contracts community based, not-for-profit organisations across Australia to provide support services to families. The Department's Men and Family Relationships initiative recognises that men have particular needs when seeking help with relationship difficulties. *Back on track* is a practical resource that acknowledges these initiatives.

## Philosophy

Many people have strong (and sometimes unexplored) understandings of what it is to be a family. Ask any child to draw 'a family' and we can all see the picture — it's mum, dad and the kids, a pet or two and a house with a garden. Ask that same child to draw 'their' family and the picture might be very different.

*Back on track* recognises that Australian families today take many different forms. They all have their place and reflect the choices and circumstances of all the members of each family. All have the capacity to work and to be functional families.

This resource is constructed on the basis that all people have strengths, knowledge and skills gained from their life experience — and that recognising this is a great start.

A key position taken in *Back on track* is that the couple relationship is the central plank of the repartnered family. The couple is the reason for the new family. Managing the tasks of looking after the couple relationship and forming an effective parenting team is seen as essential for the survival and healthy growth of the new family.

Balanced with this, *Back on track* acknowledges the principle enshrined in the Family Law Act of 1975 and subsequent amendments, that children have a right to be cared for, and to have continuing relationships with each of their parents.

The program has a strong focus on parenting. Shared parenting is a core aspiration in the philosophy of this

resource. All children want and need their parents to care for them, love them and support them; all parents should be encouraged to meet this need and where necessary, assisted in developing the skills to ensure they can.

*Back on track* assists service providers who are involved in supporting and resourcing single or separated parents and repartnered families.

*Back on track* specifically aims to involve men in repartnering education and in the ongoing decision-making related to their children. It does this by using language that is inclusive of men; by providing activities that men are more likely to feel comfortable doing and by acknowledging the issues and realities faced by men who go through separation and repartnering. It acknowledges that men and women may experience this process differently; that they are expected to deal with it differently and are usually treated accordingly by family, friends and organisations they come into contact with through work and play.

*Back on track* was developed with the belief that service providers who work with families need to have a range of ways to communicate effectively and find solutions to problems raised during this interaction. Some of these 'entry points' will involve counselling, group work and community education.

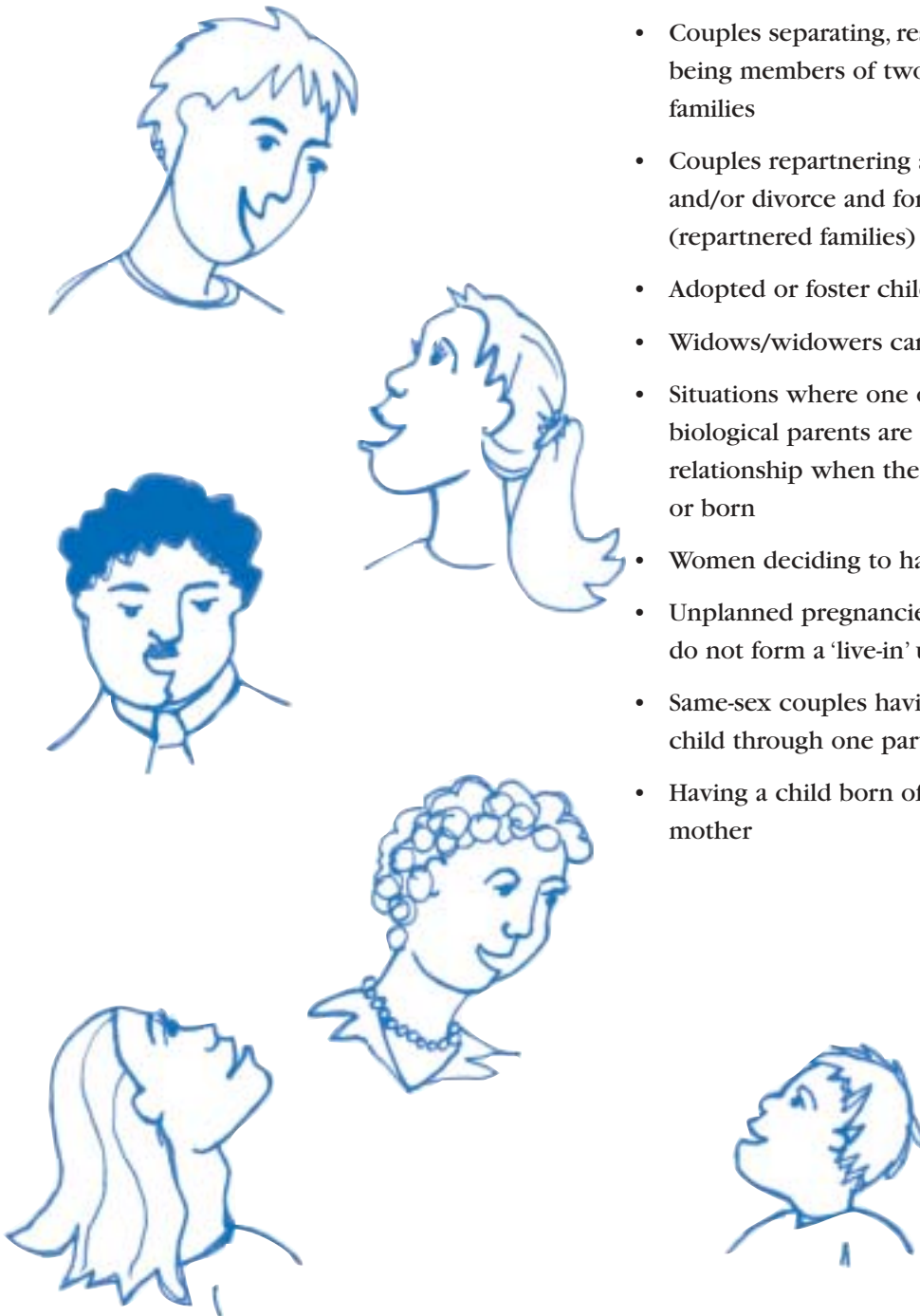
*Back on track* was developed with the presumption that relationship counselling and education is positive and preventative, rather than something that people require at a time of crisis or failure. It is important that families have access to a range of learning options that are realistic to them.

The content of this resource has been developed from counsellors' and educators' clinical experience and practical wisdom. This has resulted in a practical document, which helps service providers to adapt it to suit different theoretical/philosophical approaches.

## Australian families today

Although the majority of families are formed by a married, heterosexual couple having a child together, families are formed in many other ways. Children are conceived and cared for in a variety of circumstances, including:

- Couples separating, resulting in children being members of two single-parent families
- Couples repartnering after separation and/or divorce and forming stepfamilies (repartnered families)
- Adopted or foster children
- Widows/widowers caring for children.
- Situations where one or both of the biological parents are in another relationship when the child is conceived or born
- Women deciding to have children alone
- Unplanned pregnancies, where a couple do not form a 'live-in' unit
- Same-sex couples having a biological child through one partner
- Having a child born of a surrogate mother



## 'Ideal' families

The nuclear family type prevails as the societal reference point when thinking about families, even though the incidence of many other family types has increased in recent decades.

The idea of the biological nuclear family needs to be recognised and challenged so that other family forms including single and repartnered families can be accepted as equally functional and legitimate.

In these family forms, separation defines the sameness between them — all experience this. It is the repartnering process that varies.

Separated and repartnered families exist in a variety of forms in Australia, including:

- Families where one partner has no children and the other partner has children from a previous relationship (the partner without the children may or may not have been in a committed relationship before — so may or may not be experiencing for the first time a partnership and 'ready-made' children)
- Families in which both adults have children from previous relationships
- Families in which some children live full-time and others live part-time
- Families in which some children are from previous relationships and some are the biological and/or adopted children of this couple
- Families where the new partner is close to the age of the children

- Families where the new partner is considerably older than the children's biological parent
- Families where both partners have children from previous and current relationships and the children's ages span from early childhood to adulthood.
- Same-sex couples with children from previous relationships

The repartnered family is far more complex than the original family. The introduction of a new partner, and the process of integrating this partner (and his or her children) to form the new repartnered family requires structural changes, emotional adjustments and the negotiation of roles.

For most people this requires the continual learning and practice of new understandings, skills, and behaviours if the repartnered family is to succeed. *Back on track* helps service providers to guide their clients through what is almost always new and unfamiliar territory.

*Back on track* provides information and resources for service providers to use in designing, implementing and evaluating learning experiences for people who are separating, separated, repartnering and/or repartnered. It can be used in a variety of ways and in different settings.

It has been arranged in discrete, easy-to-use sections:

1. **Background** information (this section)
2. **Core program** content — which describes the four pivotal ‘stopovers’ in the journey between separation and repartnering. In *Back on track* they are called:
  - Separating
  - Future directions
  - Repartnering
  - And then! ... Epilogue.
3. **Handouts** which correspond to each of the sections and activities, for use with people participating in sessions
4. **How to** make the most of *Back on track* — skills, marketing your program of activities, preparing a budget and other practical advice.

## Navigating the core content

The core content section includes references and illustrated ‘maps’ to help service providers and participants to visualise the ‘journey’ of separating and repartnering and the terrain of each stop in that journey.

The last content section ‘And then!’ is an epilogue. It is shorter than the first three sections and simply addresses the possibilities for moving forward after separation and repartnering.

The first three detailed sections contain common sub-headings and formats to allow service providers to select relevant

components — by issues, stage of process or the people involved, to deliver the program content flexibly and according to need.

Each of these three content sections contain:

- The key developmental tasks of the stage (stated as key issues)
- Commonly held social myths related to the stage, so that they can be considered and their accuracy assessed against reality
- Background notes on each stage:
  - roles, identity and boundaries
  - relationships
  - emotions
  - parenting
  - money matters
  - legal matters.

The content is particularly suited to group work.

Each of these sections also contain practical exercises, tasks and handouts for service users to draw on, and adapt to use in their programs.

The perspectives of adults, children and extended family are also addressed in each section. These notes provide guidance to service providers and help develop understanding of their participants and clients.

Suggested exercises and tasks will facilitate participants’ learning. They will:

- Increase understanding of their situations
- Increase understanding of their emotions and behaviours
- Learn and develop new skills and behaviours
- Accomplish the tasks and challenges relevant to their life stage.

## Key concept explained

The metaphor of a 'journey' is used throughout this resource. It was selected because it conjures images of development and experience; of going back over familiar ground and traversing new terrain. It works with the idea that travelling can be frightening, rewarding, satisfying and difficult.

Anyone who has taken even the shortest day trip with a family knows that the needs of each family member demand attention: that each member can feel cramped, hungry or tired as well as excited and energised by sharing an experience with the people they love. Planning a day out — especially with children — takes organisation and courage! A short holiday is a major challenge. A complete adjustment to family life due to separation and repartnering can be a seemingly insurmountable challenge in co-ordination.

Separation and repartnering is the most serious journey a family can take — together or apart — because they need to find a way to function as a family in a new configuration. When children are involved, there is a bond that does not end with the divorce or the division of property. Each family member will experience the journey in their own unique way. Each will have needs, fears and moments of elation; what makes some sad will make others angry or happy.

The idea of a journey (and travelling) suits the terrain of separation and repartnering because, although there is common ground, the process is not always linear. Some people spend more time in particular stages (or locations) than others. Some

participants miss destinations altogether — perhaps going from repartnering to repartnering without pausing to experience being single and the possibilities they can choose from which are shown in 'Future Directions'. For some, the journey is a way of life, for others it's uncomfortable — the constant movement and lack of stability is irritating.

The four stages or 'locations' of the journey are named accordingly in *Back on track*.

They are shown visually in a map, which will be referred to throughout the pages of *Back on track*.

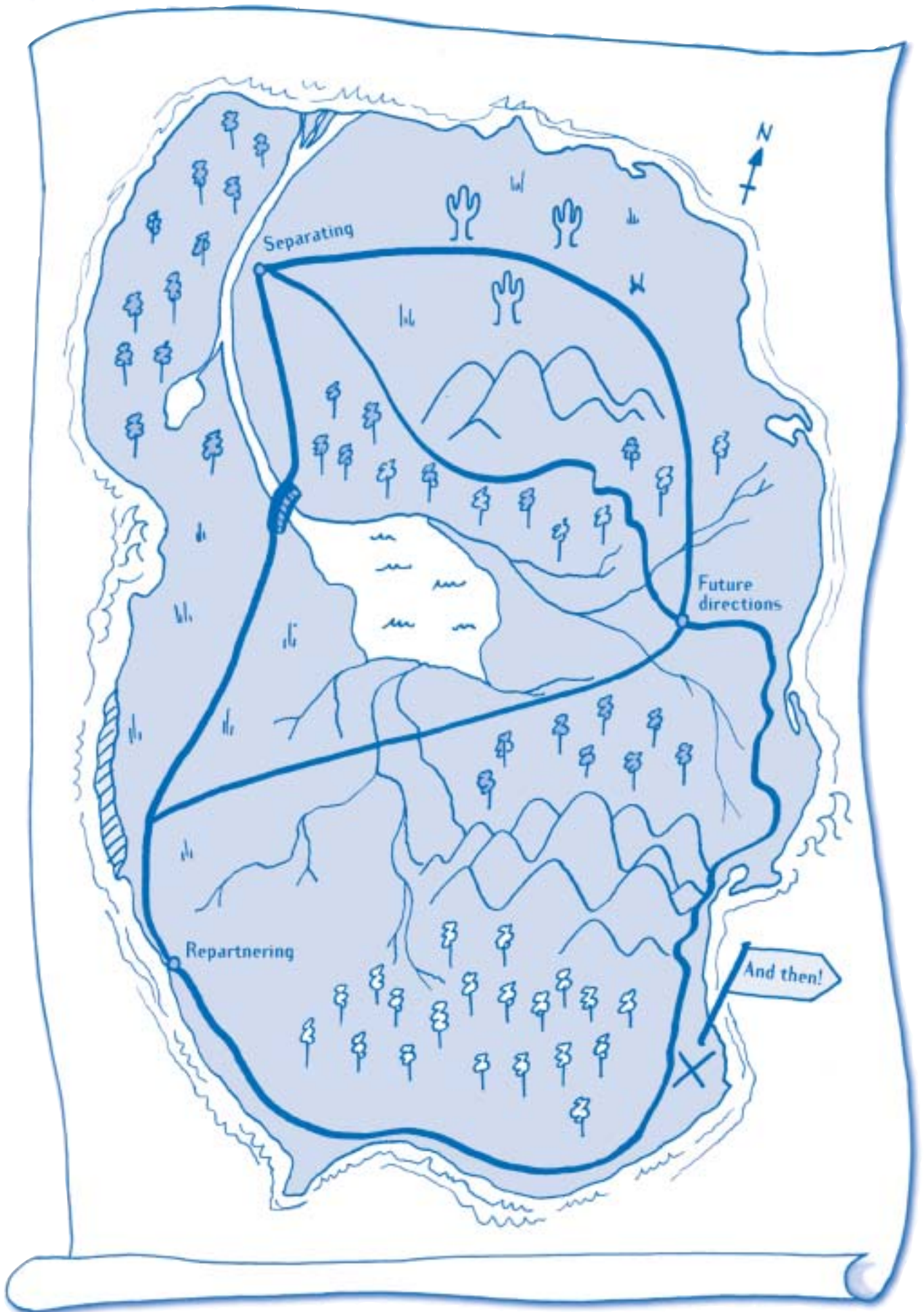
**Separating:** This stage refers to the period in people's lives when they have separated from their partner.

**Future Directions:** This stage refers to the period in people's lives when they are either single, or are in a new, but not necessarily permanent, relationship and are considering their future options.

**Repartnering:** This stage refers to the period in people's lives when they repartner with the intention of establishing an enduring relationship. It includes the process of preparing for, establishing and consolidating a new relationship with someone other than their ex-partner, where one or both partners have children from a previous relationship.

**And then!:** This stage refers to the period in people's lives when they adjust to the reality of their new family arrangements.

Each of the stages suggests that participants should explore new territory and consider what kind of adjustments they can make to adapt to the new environment through practical tasks and activities.



Clinical work suggests that building on the results of learning by systematically addressing the issues relevant to participants in each section will increase the benefits that participants will gain out of the program when it is delivered at a local level.

This resource aims to provide 'a map' that can be shared by service providers and program participants as they support individuals in their travels and self-

discoveries and ultimately in finding the destination where a new family can form and live.

Each stage is depicted in 'close up' through a map of that specific terrain and the kinds of landmarks common to it. For example, turn to page 9 to find a map of the 'location' of separating.

## Key symbols

Key symbols used throughout the resource are shown below. They are common to each section and provide a quick and easy reference tool for readers who are interested in a specific theme or issue.



Key issues



Roles, identity and boundaries

Myths



Emotions



Background notes



Parenting



Adults



Money matters



Children



Legal matters



Extended family



Group exercises



Relationships



Homework