

EVERYDAY ANSWERS

A GUIDE TO FAMILY LAW



Advice | Service | Solutions



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About Michael Lynch Family Lawyers

Michael Lynch Family Lawyers was established in 1996, the first Specialist Family Law firm in Brisbane. Today we are a leading Specialist Family Law firm and proud to be one of the largest in Queensland.

About this booklet

This booklet is designed to help you gain a basic understanding of Family Law in Australia. We are a Specialist Family Law Firm practising in Queensland; therefore, this booklet has particular reference to Queensland. However, as the *Family Law Act* is Commonwealth legislation, this book also refers to the situation in Australia, generally, where matters pertaining to family law are (for the most part) dealt with in the Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia, Division 1 and Division 2 (FCFCOA).

This book provides general comments only and is not intended to give any specific legal advice. Changes to the law occur regularly. Michael Lynch Family Lawyers will not accept responsibility for any loss or damage caused to anyone who relies on the information in this book.

No part of this book may be included in any document, circular, or statement, without the written approval of Michael Lynch Family Lawyers.

This book was first published in 1996 and has now been fully updated in this 17th revision.

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Separation and Divorce

I have just separated! What should I do now?

1. Stay calm.

There is life after separation. The decisions you make now may have important consequences later.

Try not to make decisions in the heat of the moment. Make rough plans that meet your needs. Remember to keep any plans flexible.

2. Consider whether it is appropriate to make a safety plan.

There is a list of helpful organisations at the back of this book.

4. Seek legal advice.

Even if you and your spouse want to negotiate matters between yourselves, your solicitor will be able to give you the information you need to act in your own best interests.

Do not rely on the experience of friends and relatives who have had relationship problems. Your situation is probably different and the law may have changed since then.

5. Prepare a careful budget.

6. Seek legal advice about where you can live.

You may be able to obtain a Court Order that gives you sole occupation of your home if required.

7. Remember to take your personal papers if you do leave.

8. Go back to collect your belongings if you need to.

If you need to go back to collect personal items that you left behind, but are afraid, you can ask the police to accompany you.

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9. Keep a diary of any incidents that relate to the children if you are having difficulties co-parenting.

10. Keep copies of all documents and letters sent to you by your solicitor.

Also keep all receipts and invoices that relate to your financial situation.

11. Ask your solicitor questions if there is anything you do not understand.

12. Consider counselling.

13. Consider mediation.

14. Make any agreements formal.

Once you and your spouse reach an agreement, make sure you make it formal.

A solicitor can explain the alternatives to you. This way you know your agreement will be enforceable by the Court.

15. Ask about your legal costs.

Solicitor's fees vary from firm to firm. Some solicitors send accounts after specific stages.

You may prefer that your solicitor sends you monthly accounts so that you are clear about your costs as you go along. Sort these things out up front as it will save you and your solicitor embarrassment and disagreements later.

16. Ask your solicitor whether or not you should make a new Will.



Can I make an agreement with my spouse without having to go to court?

It is always preferable to reach an agreement. You can try to do this through counselling, mediation, or negotiation.

Counselling

Counselling can help parents to work through issues arising in the context of co-parenting after separation.

Mediation

A mediation is a confidential and voluntary dispute resolution process. It is run by a neutral third party (a Mediator, also known as a Family Dispute Resolution Practitioner (**FDRP**)), and is designed to help you find a solution to your dispute.

It is not compulsory for your solicitor to attend mediation with you; however, it is usual for solicitors to attend with the

parties. Your solicitor will assist in focussing on the issues and maximising the prospects of an agreement being reached.

Before any Court proceedings are commenced, there are obligations on parties and their solicitors to attempt to resolve issues in dispute via mediation, where it is safe to do so. If an agreement is reached between you and your spouse at the mediation, you can speak to your solicitor about formalising the agreement in writing.

Negotiation

Experienced Family Law solicitors, such as Michael Lynch Family Lawyers, try to settle matters without going to Court. They do this through negotiation.

Most matters are settled by negotiation, or at mediation.

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What sort of agreement do I need?

The type of agreement will depend on the issue.

The most common types of arrangements are those that relate to:

- Children – Consent Order or Parenting Plan;
- Property Settlement and/or spouse maintenance – Consent Order or Financial Agreement; and
- Child support – Child Support Agreement.

What is a financial agreement?

There are three types of Financial Agreements:

- Before marriage – also known as a pre-nuptial agreement;
- During marriage; and
- After divorce

Provided that a Financial Agreement meets the requirements under the legislation and both spouses have received adequate and independent legal advice, they are binding and will be enforced by the Court.

From 1 March 2009 de facto couples can also make a Financial Agreement under the *Family Law Act*, either before, during or after the relationship has ended.

When can I get a divorce?

Family Law in Australia is based on a 'no fault' principle. The only ground for divorce in Australia is an "irretrievable breakdown" of the relationship, evidenced by 12 months' separation.

It is possible for you and your spouse to 'live under the same roof' and to still satisfy the required 12 months' separation.

When calculating 12 months' separation, any periods of reconciliation that are less than three months long are not counted, and do not stop a 12 month period from being calculated.

You may apply for a divorce either individually or together.

Divorce applications are handled by the CFCA (Division 2).

A Divorce Order becomes final one month and one day after it is made. Neither person is allowed to re-marry before the Order becomes final.

In marriages where there are children under 18 years, the Court must be satisfied that appropriate

arrangements have been made for their care.

Once the Divorce Order has become final, you have a deadline of 12 months in which to start proceedings for property settlement, and/or spouse maintenance if not finalised already. After 12 months you must apply to the Court to be allowed to start an application.

Do I have to change my name?

A party to a marriage is not legally obliged to use their spouse's surname when they marry. Historically, the use of a husband's surname has developed through custom.

If you decide to use your spouse's surname, you can change back to your birth name at any time you want to. This often happens after separation.

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Do I have to support my spouse?

Spouse maintenance is where a payment is made by one spouse to the other because of a significant difference in their incomes.

There is no formula to apply in determining the amount of spouse maintenance, rather there are a number of factors that the Court takes into account when deciding whether maintenance has to be paid.

Any money received from an income-tested pension or benefit is ignored by the Court when deciding if maintenance will be paid or not.

Sometimes the Court will say that maintenance must be paid for a specific period of time so that the other person can complete a training course.

Maintenance payments will end if any of the following occur:

- The person receiving maintenance remarries;
- The person receiving maintenance dies; or
- The person paying maintenance dies.

Children

Who gets the children?

It does not matter whether parents are married or in a de facto relationship. All children are covered by the *Family Law Act*.

The *Family Law Act* has undergone changes with respect to the manner in which children's matters are determined by the Court, as of 6 May 2024.

Considerations

When the Court has to make a decision, the Judge does not interview the children. The Court can ask a child-expert to help work out the wishes of the children, and by recording these in a report such as a Child Impact Report or a Family Report, for the benefit of the Court.

The objects of the Family Law Act in relation to children's matters are to ensure that the **best interests** of children are met, including by ensuring their safety; and to give effect to the Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted by United Nations on 20.11.1989.

How often can I see my children who do not live with me?

What was previously called 'contact' is now called 'spends time with'.

Court Orders can specify the frequency, length and type of time that a parent can spend with their children.

A parent's time with the children is determined according to what is in the best interests of the children.

Time shared between parents and children is the right of the child and not the right of the parent.

It is usually of benefit to the children to have broad ranging time with both parents, where it is safe to do so, to be able to enjoy their company and to receive their guidance, love and affection.

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It is rare for the Court to deny a parent any time with their children although, where the Court is satisfied that a parent represents an unacceptable risk of harm to a child, a no time Order can be made.

If you have not seen your children for some time, it may be best for the recommencement of time to gradually increase over a period of weeks/months.

The law promotes the involvement of both parents in their children's lives as much as possible where it is safe to do so.

If you live close to your children it might be possible for you to spend time with them not only on weekends but also on mid-week evenings and afterschool. If you live interstate, longer periods of holiday time might be more appropriate.

In working out your children's arrangements the Court can take into account the children's wishes, but this will not be the only factor that the Court considers. The emphasis the Court places on the children's wishes will vary depending on the age of the children.

Parenting Orders will always be based on the paramount principle of what is in the best interests of the child/ren and this requires the Court to have regard to the following considerations:

- (a) what arrangements would promote the safety (including safety from being exposed to family violence, abuse, neglect, or other harm) of the child/ren and each person having care of the child/ren;
- (b) any views expressed by the child/ren;
- (c) the developmental, psychological, emotional and cultural needs of the child/ren;
- (d) the capacity of each parent to provide for the child/ren's developmental, psychological, emotional and cultural needs;

- (e) the benefit to the child/ren of being able to have a relationship with their parents, and significant others, where it is safe to do so;
- (f) anything else that is relevant to the particular circumstances of the child/ren;
- (g) where relevant, the child/ren's right to enjoy their Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander culture, by having the support, opportunity and encouragement necessary to connect with, and maintain their connection with, members of their family and with their community, culture, country and language.

Orders for 'time spent with' children can change as circumstances change. As children grow older, their lifestyles and development needs change. It is best if arrangements for children stay flexible. Many parents are able to reach agreement and to alter arrangements by agreement if circumstances change. They can do this without having to go to Court.



If you find it difficult to agree on how time is to be spent with your children, a counselling session may be helpful. After getting help from a counsellor, many parents are able to agree.

Mediation is another option.

Any of the following people can apply to the Court for the care of the children:

- either or both of the children's parents, step-parents, grandparents, guardians appointed by a Will; or
- any other person concerned with the care, welfare and development of the children.

Grandparents or other relatives can also be granted Court Orders to spend time with the children.

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Independent Children's Lawyer (ICL)

In some cases, the Court may order that an Independent Children's Lawyer (ICL) be appointed. An ICL is a solicitor who acts in the proceedings and must form an independent view, based on the evidence available, of what is in the best interests of the child and act upon what, in their view, the ICL believes to be in the best interest of the child. ICL's are not a child's legal representative and are not obliged to act on a child's instructions, although they must act impartially with the parties and ensure that any views of a child are fully put before the Court.

Documenting arrangements

Children's care arrangements can be documented with either a Parenting Plan or a Consent Order. Parenting Plans are written agreements, signed by both parents and set out the children's arrangements. They are not registered with the Court and are not legally binding. If you want your agreement to be legally binding, the terms of the agreement must be drawn up as a Consent Order and filed with the Court.

Who has to support the children?

Both parents are obliged to provide financial support for children until the children reach 18 years, are married or are adopted.

Financial support may also be claimed through the Court for children over 18 years, to enable the children to complete their education, or because the children are mentally or physically disabled.

A step-parent has a duty to maintain children only if there is a Court Order in force to do so.

Child support

The Child Support Agency was established in 1989. Its purpose is to assess and collect child support payments.

Child support is assessed by the Child Support Agency pursuant to a formula.

The formula was completely changed on 1 July 2008 and is now based on a number of factors, including:

- The income of both parents;
- The level of care that each parent has.

The formula also takes into account that older children cost more, via a "schedule of costs" that calculates the cost of children according to the combined income of both parents.

The Agency assessment may be departed from in special circumstances including where:

- The children have special needs;

- The children are attending a private school by agreement of both parents;
- There are significant transport costs involved in 'time spent with' a child; and
- Either parent's income cannot be easily calculated.

Agreements

There are two types of Child Support Agreement, binding and limited.

A binding agreement has strict requirements, including a solicitor's certificate being signed. They can only be terminated by a further written agreement or an Order of the Court.

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A limited agreement does not need a solicitor's certificate however there must be a formula assessment already in place and the amounts payable under the agreement must be equal to or greater than the formula assessment.

What should I do if I cannot pay?

Get legal advice immediately if you cannot pay the required amount of Child Support.

This will help you to avoid any extra costs for not paying.

If you lose your job and receive an income-tested benefit, your assessment will reduce to a minimal amount.

Who enforces payment?

The Child Support Agency is usually responsible for collecting payments, unless you agree to a private collection. If arrears accrue it is possible for you to pursue enforcement of arrears through the Court, if you wish.

If you are making payments and they fall behind, the Agency may take any of the following steps:

- Ask you to produce certain documents to make clear your financial situation. The Agency is also able to access protected information held by the tax office;
- Contact your employer and have child support payments deducted from your wages;
- Intercept any tax refund.

If you have consistently failed to pay your Child Support, you may be prevented from leaving the country.

Can I change my children's name?

You cannot change your children's surname without the consent of the other parent or order of the court.

If you try to do so without the other parent's consent, the other parent can apply to the Court to stop the name from being changed.

Can I take my children out of Australia?

There are certain times when it is an offence to take your children out of Australia. These include times when:

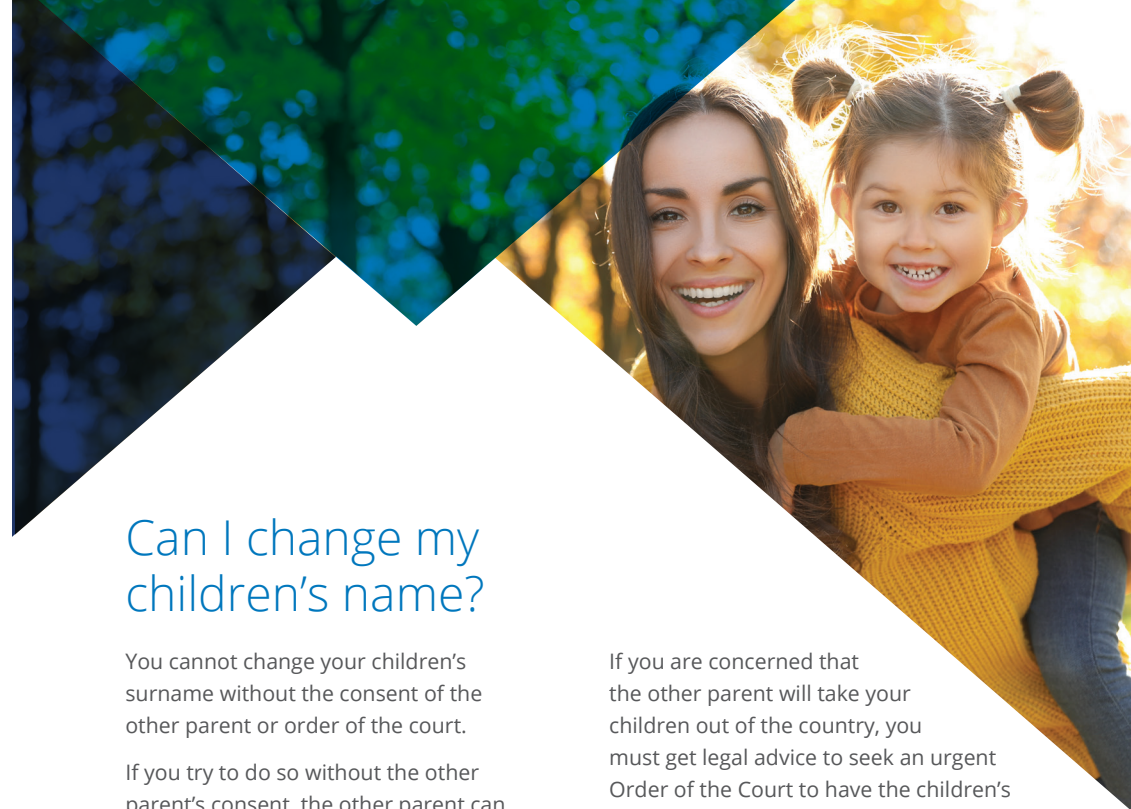
- there is a Court Order that relates to where the children will live; or
- there are Court proceedings on foot relating to the children, where a Court is in the process of deciding about parenting arrangements.

If you are concerned that the other parent will take your children out of the country, you must get legal advice to seek an urgent Order of the Court to have the children's names placed on the 'Watch List' maintained by the Australian Federal Police. If a child's name is on this list, they will be prevented from leaving the country from any international air or sea port.

If the children have current passports, and you are afraid that they may be taken out of the country, you should apply to the Court to have their passports delivered to the Court and held for safe keeping.

If you wish to take your children overseas on a holiday and the other parent has refused permission, you can apply to the Court for an Order allowing you to temporarily leave the country with the children. The Court may put some conditions on such an Order.

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Determining parentage

A paternity test is a common occurrence in Family Law cases. The test involves a DNA sample being taken from the alleged father, the mother and the child, to provide evidence as to whether the alleged father is the biological parent of the child.

Paternity tests can be done in a variety of medical sample ways and provide extremely accurate results.

The tests can be conducted during the pregnancy however in legal proceedings the testing occurs after a child is born.

If agreement cannot be reached for testing to occur an application can be made to the Court directing that the testing occur, provided the Court is satisfied that there is a presumption of parentage.

If the Court orders that an alleged father must attend for DNA testing and they refuse they are deemed to have failed the test, and to be the father.

When a separated parent wants to register an Application with the Child Support Agency, if there is insufficient evidence of parentage then the Agency will refuse the Application.

If the Agency accepts the Application but the assessed party disputes it, then the matter must be resolved by the Court.

Property

How will our property be divided?

The *Family Law Act* sets out how property is divided, for married couples or for de facto couples (who separated after 1 March 2009).

What is a de facto relationship?

A de facto relationship (includes same gender couples) and is defined as “the relationship of a couple living together on a genuine domestic basis”.

A de facto spouse is able to pursue a property settlement where one of the following conditions exists:

- You have lived in a de facto relationship for at least 2 years; or
- You have a child from the relationship; or
- It would be unjust not to recognise a de facto spouse’s financial or non-financial contribution; or
- The relationship is registered.

Determining a property division

On an application to determine property matters, the following principals will be assessed by the Court:

- Whether the overall circumstances of the matter warrant any order for a division of property being made, and where so warranted:
 - > The determination of the ‘pool’ of assets and liabilities (including current values) available for distribution;
 - > The financial and non-financial contributions made by both parties to the asset pool during the relationship;

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- > Indirect contributions such as inheritances or gifts received by the parties or either of them from family or friends;
- > The contributions made by each party to the welfare of the family such as caring for children or housekeeping duties; and
- > Each party's future needs such as their age, health, ability to earn an income from employment and caring arrangements for children.

Time limits

A married couple can make a property settlement at any time after separation but if an Application for property settlement to the Court is to be made that must be filed within 12 months of a Final Divorce Order.

If an Application to the Court for property settlement in a de facto relationship is to be made that must be filed in Court within 2 years after the date of separation.

What happens to superannuation?

In property settlements under the *Family Law Act*, superannuation is defined as 'property'.

The law regarding superannuation was changed in 2002. It provides detailed formulas for calculating superannuation in property settlements.

These formulas need specialist advice. Ask your solicitor for help in these situations.

Superannuation funds can be split between spouses and rolled over as part of a property settlement. It is not compulsory to split superannuation.

Domestic Violence

Domestic Violence

Domestic violence is a widespread problem in the community.

Legislative changes

On 17 September 2012, the *Domestic and Family Violence Protection Act 2012* commenced in Queensland. This Act replaced the previous domestic violence laws that had existed in Queensland for 20 years. Domestic Violence is an area of law that is governed state by state.

What is domestic violence?

Domestic violence includes any of the following acts:

- Physical or sexual abuse;
- Emotional or psychological abuse;
- Economic abuse;
- Threatening or coercive behaviour;
- Damaging a person's property;
- Threatening a person with death or injury;
- Threatening to commit suicide or self-harm;
- Threatening or causing death or injury to an animal to control, dominate or coerce another person;
- Unauthorised surveillance;
- Any other controlling or dominating behaviour that causes a person to fear for their safety or wellbeing.

Domestic Violence includes behaviour or a pattern of behaviour that may occur over a period of time and may include one or a series of acts which, when considered cumulatively, are abusive, threatening, coercive or cause fear. Examples of behaviours that may give rise to a 'pattern of behaviour' being categorised as domestic violence include but are not limited to:

- Repeated derogatory taunts/insults;
- Threatening violence or injury to a person, their children, other persons, their pets and/or their property;
- Preventing a person from making or keeping connections with family, friends or culture;
- Following a person when they are in public;
- Coercing a person to relinquish control over their assets or income;
- Preventing a person from having access to joint financial assets for the purpose of meeting normal household expenses;
- Threatening to withhold medication;
- Monitoring a person's email, text message, social media or internet browser history;
- Using GPS devices to track a person's movements.

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Protection orders

In Queensland, domestic violence legislation covers the following relationships:

- Family relationships – including spouse, child, stepchild, parent, step parent, sibling, grandparent, half-sibling, in-laws etc;
- Intimate personal relationships – including spousal relationships, engagement relationships and couple relationships;

Informal care relationships – where one person is dependent on the other person for help in an activity of daily living.

The definitions of spousal, couple and intimate personal relationships apply equally, whether the people are of the same or opposite gender.

Children under 18 years of age can seek a Protection Order or have an Order made against them but only in intimate personal relationships or in informal care relationships where the care does not involve a parent or relative.

Who can apply for a protection order?

A person who claims to be a victim of domestic violence can apply to the State Magistrates Court for a Protection Order.

The Court must be satisfied of the following:

- That a relevant relationship exists between the aggrieved and respondent;
- That the respondent has committed domestic violence against the aggrieved; and
- That a Protection Order is necessary or desirable to protect the aggrieved from domestic violence.

The police have power to take a person into custody if they suspect domestic violence has occurred or is occurring.

The order

The police will serve a copy of the Application and summons on the person accused of domestic violence.

The terms of the Order may vary according to the circumstances of each case and what the Court thinks is appropriate in view of those circumstances.

An Order can name children, associates or relatives of the aggrieved in certain circumstances.

If a Protection Order is made, it is generally in force for five years. Interstate orders and registered New Zealand Orders are enforceable in Queensland.

Helpful Information



Frequently asked questions?

1. What are the grounds for divorce?

Where the marriage has broken down irretrievably, evidenced by 12 months' continuous separation.

2. Do I have to try counselling?

Only if a divorce order is applied for within 2 years of the date of marriage, otherwise no.

3. After I am divorced can I use my old surname?

A person can use the name they had on their Birth Certificate at any time.

4. Do we have to be divorced first before an order can be made regarding the children?

No. A Court can make Orders about the welfare of children even if you are not divorced.

5. What about the children of de facto couples?

All children are treated the same way by the *Family Law Act*.

6. What if my child is taken away?

First, see a solicitor. The process is complex and you must act quickly so it is not the sort of thing you should do by yourself. You may have to apply for a Recovery Order.

7. How long do court orders relating to children last?

Orders end when the child turns 18 years, marries, is adopted, or when the Order is cancelled or changed by the Court.

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8. At what age can children decide with whom they want to live?

It is a fallacy that children can decide with whom they want to live upon reaching a certain age. Children's wishes will be considered as a relevant factor and balanced against their age and development to determine what is in their best interests.

9. What if a man denies that he is the father?

A medical test can be used to establish whether a man is the father. This is called a paternity test. You cannot force a man to undergo this test. It would have to be ordered by the Court. You should ask a solicitor to help you get this Order.

If an Order is granted and he still refuses, then the Court can presume that he is the father, based on his refusal.

10. In a property settlement is there a 50/50 rule?

No. There are many factors that are used to work out how property is divided.

11. Can I include other things besides property in a consent order?

Yes. You can include spouse maintenance and arrangements for your children. You can deal with all of these issues at one time.

12. What can I do if I think my relationship involves domestic violence?

- Consider making a safety plan including preparing an 'escape bag'. Services like 1800RESPECT can assist with this;
- Consider confiding in trusted friends, family, neighbours to provide support and assistance;
- Keep a diary of important/concerning events;
- Keep your important documents in a safe place;
- Be aware of your online safety;
- Seek advice from a solicitor;
- Consider whether you should obtain a protection order including the possibility of an order for sole use of the home;
- Consider whether you are eligible to access paid family and domestic violence leave from your employer;
- Call 000 in all cases of emergency.

Some useful contact numbers and websites

Legal Services

Legal Aid Queensland	Ph: 1300 651 188 www.legalaid.qld.gov.au
Women's Legal Service (Queensland)	Ph: 1800 957 957
Caxton Legal Centre	Ph: (07) 3214 6333
Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia	Ph: 1300 352 000 www.fcfoa.gov.au

Counselling

Domestic Violence Connect - Women's Line	Ph: 1800 811 811
Domestic Violence Connect - Men's Line	Ph: 1800 600 636
National Sexual Assault Domestic Violence	Ph: 1800 respect (1800 737 732)
Crisis Care (Department of Families)	Ph: 1800 177 135
Kids Help Line (24 hours)	Ph: 1800 551 800 www.kidshelpline.com.au
Parentline	Ph: 1300 301 300
Relationships Australia	Ph: 1300 364 277
Better Relationships	Ph: 1300 114 397
Gambling Help Line	Ph: 1800 858 858

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Lifeline National (24 hours)	13 11 14
Centacare	1300 236 822
Child Support Agency (Services Australia)	1800 241 272 or 131 272 www.servicesaustralia.gov.au
Centrelink	136 150
Family Relationship Centres	www.familyrelationships.gov.au
Family Relationship Advice Line	1800 050 321

Contact Centres

Gold Coast	1300 364 277
Logan	(07) 3442 1500
Caboolture	(07) 5432 3720
Ipswich	1300 364 277
Sunshine Coast	(07) 5479 6971





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