

Family Separation



Introduction

Family separation can be a stressful time for everyone in the family and can result in challenges adjusting to the new family structure. Children will often look toward the adults around them to help manage their feelings and behaviour, so it is important children have a social network of supportive people they can rely on. When parents focus on the needs of children and work together to co-parent, the outcomes for children improve. Potential benefits of co-parenting may include: increase in child's tolerance of family changes, improvement in child's psychological wellbeing, reduction in child's challenging behaviours, and a supportive co-parenting relationship. Even if it is in the best interest of everyone involved, it is sometimes difficult for the adults. So, to ease the transition to co-parenting, we have created some tips that might help you and your children.

Effects on Emotions

Separation can be upsetting for children because through their eyes, their whole world is changing. They become unsure of what the future will look like. They may deal with their feelings in many ways. Their way of coping with change can be influenced by their personality, their temperament, their environment, and if they have any inbuilt tools to manage overwhelming and big feelings. Some emotions you may see your children feel are:

- Anger - at one or both parents
- Fearful - of the unfamiliar situation, that they will be left alone, or they will not see the other parent
- Sadness - at the loss of the "family"
- Denial - hoping that their parents will get back together
- Grief - at the loss of their previous family life together
- Powerless - not being able to control any of the changes happening
- Insecure - having to move to new home or school
- Worry / Guilt - that they may have caused the separation
- Torn - feel that their loyalty is being tested
- Vulnerable - feeling like they need to choose between their parents

Effects on Behaviour

Children have very little control over many of the changes that happen during a family separation. In trying to cope with the changes, children can respond in many different ways. Often children in the same family will respond in very different ways to each other. Some of the possible behaviours you might see are:

- Frequent emotional outbursts/tantrums
- Conflict with siblings/parents
- Increased defiance/testing of limits
- Withdrawal/shutting down/spending more time in their room
- Refusal to talk about the separation
- Refusal to attend school
- Academic performance problems
- Bargaining
- Secrecy
- Engaging in risky behaviours
- Relationship changes with parents
- Loss of confidence and trust



How You Can Support Your Children

- Be available for your children if they want to talk about the separation. Some children may be hesitant to talk about it so let them know that when they are ready to talk, they can talk with you or other supportive adults outside of the family.
- Explain that the separation is not their fault.
- Listen carefully to how they feel about things – validate their feelings and respond to your children with compassion and empathy. Create a safe talking space and remember not to take anything personally as they express their wishes or distress. They are talking about how it feels for them, from their perspective and it is normal for them to be upset and angry.
- Your response and your reactions will affect your child's ability to cope and recover. So be mindful of your body language, the way you speak, your facial expressions, and your responses to your child e.g., “Your mother/father” vs Mom/Dad is going to pick you up today.
- Spend time with them - Be reliable about arrangements to see your children, whether that be shared care or attending sports/activities experiences.
- Reassure them that they will continue to be loved and cared for by both parents.
- Let them know that you and the other parent are trying to sort out differences.
- Continue with normal activities and routines. Continue to encourage and support their strengths (e.g., sports, friends, hobbies, interests).
- Help children adjust to the changes - It will take time. It can be helpful to use visual pictures on the fridge for kids to know what is happening, who are they with, and when.
- Keep them away from any conflict - Blame, anger, and conflict will have consequences on children's wellbeing. You, being a major figure in your children's life, are in the best position to help prevent them from feeling overwhelmed.



- Be positive about the other parent (even when it is not easy!). It is important to not badmouth or make negative or sarcastic comments about the other parent in the children's presence – this includes when having conversations with others about that parent. Even when you think they cannot hear you, children often will find a way to listen!
- It is important to not discuss specifics (e.g., mediation, financial, etc) about the separation with your children. Children are not developmentally equipped to cope with adult challenges. Fortunately, you can get your support by talking and sharing information about your concerns with friends and relatives, being part of a support group, or, you may want to seek professional help through your GP or a counselling service.
- Remember you are a role model to your children – you are responsible for how you react to the other parent and lead the way for your children's responses and reactions. This is a time for adjustment to the many changes occurring. Be kind to yourself as no parent is perfect.

Additional Resources

<https://www.relationshipswa.org.au/resources/booklets>

<https://www.rasa.org.au/letstalkabout/>

