

Supporting your children during and after separation

Parental separation is a tough time for most children. However, it does not have to have a negative long-term effect upon their social and emotional development. Your children need your help to cope with the changes and losses they experience as a result of the separation. If given enough support they will most likely regain their sense of emotional and social well-being and continue to thrive and develop. It has been found that there are many ways that you can effectively help your children through the separation process.

- Explain the separation
- Talk about feelings
- Listen to your children's opinions when arranging new family structures
- Promote meaningful relationships with both parents
- Avoid parental conflict
- Contact with other important people
- Seek professional help
- Do's and Don'ts when helping your children

1 *Explain the separation*

Firstly, as talked about in the previous section, explain to your children why their parents are separating, explain the processes, as well as the changes to your family structures. It is important to remember that some children (depending on their age and developmental stage) do not have the ability to make sense of events in their lives, such as the separation of their parents. They will, however, make sense of it as best they can; using the information they have as well as their abilities at the time.

Children need adults to help them make sense of events in their lives. This will ensure they do not get hurt by their own versions of events. If the children involved have not been adequately informed by their parents or other adults in their lives they will make up their own stories. These stories frequently involve blaming themselves for their parents' separation; thinking that their parents are separating because they have not been behaving well; believing their parents do not love them anymore or might stop loving them; and/or thinking they can get their parents back together again. Such stories can have a harmful effect upon the child's further development and state of well-being.

Be explicit that it is not your children's fault but you are separating because you as parents cannot live together anymore, and reassure them that both parents still love them. Children benefit from feeling loved by both their parents (and other primary caregivers), as well as by feeling free to love and express their love. Hence, feeling they are still a part of a family can be of great importance for children.

2 *Talk about feelings*

In order to cope and process emotions and experiences children need to have lots of opportunities to talk about their feelings and experiences. It has been found that children

who are encouraged to talk about their feelings feel better about themselves as adults than children who are not provided with the opportunity. Children need to be listened to and acknowledged.

It is important for all children throughout all their development stages and into adulthood to talk about their feelings. And it is extra important when children are going through a potentially sad and difficult phase. Confirm your children's feelings by saying: 'You feel sad', 'You feel angry'. Make them feel heard and understood. Ensure that your children know their feelings are valid.

3 *Listen to your children's opinions when arranging new family structures*

Children need to feel that their feelings and wishes are considered when decisions that affect them are being made. Involve your children as much as possible in the separation process. As the parent you may think you know how much involvement is best for your child, but it is wise to actually talk to them about it. This does not mean that the children should make the decisions, but their wishes need to be listened to and included when new family arrangements are organised.

Most children of school age want to be consulted about decisions that affect them and to have their needs and wishes taken into account, although they do not necessarily want to make the decisions. To what extent they participate in the decision making process depends heavily upon their age and development stage. But, in general, it is useful to keep in mind that they need to be heard, and if appropriate, included in the process.

4 *Promote meaningful relationships with both parents*

Children need contact with both parents (unless this is unsafe). Attachment is significant for children's development and well-being so it is really important that the children involved are allowed to maintain attachment bonds with both their parents. Adequate contact with parents, in terms of both frequency and the length of time the children meet with either parent, are heavily dependent upon their age and developmental stage. Very young children need to see both their parents very frequently, though the amount of time may be shorter. The older the child the longer the time a parent can be absent without harming the child's development.

5 *Avoid parental conflict*

Children benefit greatly from seeing their parents cooperate. Research shows that if parents communicate in a co-operative manner children adjust much better to the separation. The less children know about their parents' arguments the better. They must not be put in the middle of their parents' arguments and/or fights as this can be damaging. Cooperative ways of communicating means that parents are more likely to agree upon routines regarding children's day-to-day life. This can be very beneficial for your children. Routines can be useful in ensuring your children feel safe and secure and allows your children to develop to their full potential. Children benefit from feeling that the world is a reliable place.

6 *Contact with other important people*

During this time of change, stable relationships with both parents and other significant people are very important to children - help them to identify and stay in contact with other people they relate to and trust. Your children will be able to identify people they see as being supportive. These people can include teachers, relatives from both sides of their family, friends and/or people from the community. As a parent you might be the one who your children feel closest to, but encourage your children to talk with you and others they trust about the feelings they have. This requires a safe environment and time in which children can feel confident to express their feelings. Confirm your children's feelings in the way you respond to them by starting this way:

"You're feeling angry, because..."

"You're feeling sad, because..."

This response will make them feel they are being understood. Make sure your children know their feelings are valid and that you won't get upset by what they say or feel.

You might want to consider whether you could inform other adults in your children's lives about what's happening for the children at the moment so they can be sensitive to their needs and offer appropriate support. This can include the children's teacher or school counsellor - children often act out their difficulties at school and need understanding and support.

7 *Seek professional help*

If your children continue to feel distressed, angry, sad or are showing significant behaviour changes you should talk it through with a professional. There might be help available for your children such as individual therapy, or counselling, or groups for children experiencing their parents' separation. Remain calm and patient, and remind yourself that children need sufficient time to adjust.

8 *Do's and Don'ts when helping your children*

DO

- Tell them you still love them
- Be positive about the other parent
- Allow them to express their feelings and work them out
- Let them know that you think it is important for them to have an ongoing relationship with the other parent (unless there has been abuse and it is unsafe for the child)
- Emphasise that they are still part of a family - just in a different form
- Reassure them that they will be safe and cared for
- Maintain your parenting roles
- Listen to their needs and wishes when working out your new family structures
- Reassure them that it was not their fault that you separated
- Try to provide stability and continuity in their lives
- Seek emotional support from other adults or community resources for you and your children

DON'T

- Criticise, judge or make negative comments about the other parent in front of the children
- Argue with the other parent in front of the children
- Ask the children to carry messages to the other parent
- Put the children in the middle of your arguments or make your children take sides
- Threaten to send children to live with the other parent as a form of punishment
- Threaten to hinder children's contact with the other parent (unless for safety reasons)
- Turn to your children for emotional support
- Offer false hopes, such as parental reconciliation
- **Blame the children for your predicament**