

Parenting after separation or divorce



Research shows that conflicts between former partners have more negative effects on children's wellbeing than all the other consequences of a divorce or separation. Hostility between parents is the most important obstacle to children adapting well to their new family situation. It is understandable that there are often negative feelings concerning a former partner, but if your children's wellbeing is of primary importance, it is important to avoid trying to settle problems with your ex-partner in front of children. You should not put your child in the uncomfortable position of spying upon your ex-partner to provide you with information about his/her activities.

Parents should avoid putting children in the stressful situation of having to choose between them or decide with whom they would rather spend time or do certain activities. The more cordial and 'normal' the relationship is between two parents, and the more both parents are able to agree among themselves about important decisions, such as educational issues and discipline, the more likely it is that the children will adapt well to the separation.

No matter how difficult it is to maintain a good relationship with your ex-partner, it is important to realize that this is one of the best ways to ensure that your children adapt well, despite the stresses of the separation. As one parent said: "When we first divorced, Jack and I could not discuss anything without starting a fight. All the old issues would be brought up again. Now we have stopped talking about ourselves and instead spend our time talking about our kid. It has really made a big difference. Our son Charlie has calmed down and stopped acting out. I told Jack about the rules for Charlie when he is at my house, and he has agreed to use the same rules when Charlie is with him."

It is important to reassure your children that you still love them and will always love them, even if you no longer love your ex-partner. Sometimes children think that if your love for your former partner can stop, maybe your love for them can stop as well. It is important to love your children no matter what and to say it to them.

It is important that your children feel loved by both parents, and it is frequently the loss of love from the father that is of concern. Although fathers are now usually more involved with their children than in previous generations, it is still true that separation is more likely to change the involvement of fathers than mothers.

According to researchers, there are basically three patterns of involvement by fathers after a separation. Firstly, there are fathers whose involvement remains the same. That is, those who were already involved with their children continue their involvement after the separation, while those who were not very involved do not become more involved. Secondly, a parent

who was not much involved with his children may become more involved when he realizes the importance of his relationship and has the opportunity to spend time with his children on a more one-to-one basis, during visits or when the child is staying with him. Finally, there are fathers who distance themselves from their children, often because they find that the infrequent contacts are not satisfying or because the mother is extremely resistant to continued contact and the development of a significant relationship between the father and his children.

No matter how difficult it may be for you, it is generally best to encourage you and your ex-partner's continued parental involvement with your children. This is one of the best ways to ensure a smooth adaptation to the separation.

It is generally suggested that after a divorce or separation it is best to maintain the same discipline rules that existed in the family before the separation, even though you may allow more flexibility because of the stressful nature of life. It is best to establish a new routine of who does what and how things work around the house as soon as possible, and to make as few changes as possible in the lives of your children. The more that things can continue as they were, the better it will be for your children.

One of the most difficult situations, which is fairly common, is when the parent who has primary responsibility for the children appears to be more controlling and sets down more rules, while the parent who has less frequent contacts becomes more permissive and indulgent. This invariably brings about difficulties for one or both parents, and the children are more likely to develop behavioural problems. Children in this situation can have temper tantrums or disobey, and parents can feel that they are being pushed to their limits. If parents do not agree on a common approach, this situation can become a vicious circle, as one parent deals with the problem by becoming more strict and the other compensates by being lenient in order to maintain a 'good guy' status. When this occurs it is best to avoid blaming the other parent and to agree on a common approach to discipline and controls.

(Written by Sarah Dufour, Ph.D and Brian L. Mishara, Ph.D)