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A newsletter for professionals and parents

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separation



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Nurturing Families Through Separation and Divorce

by Philip Gosschalk, Clinical & Educational Psychologist | Director

The ending of a marriage or long term relationship can be a challenging experience for both partners, and a decision that is rarely entered into lightly. In addition to the complex array of emotions partners feel about the ending of their relationship, the situation is complicated further when the feelings of children are involved. While separation of parents has been shown to be a challenging experience for children, especially immediately following the event, most children adjust well to the change in their family structure with no enduring problems. Research shows, however, that children of separated parents may be more at risk of ongoing problems with their behaviour and emotions in general.

Why Separation Can Lead to Difficulties for Children

Researchers have identified that it may not be the separation itself that has the largest influence on children's adjustment, with other factors common to separating families seemingly at work. The most consistent contributor to poor outcomes for children is conflict between separated parents; however, the negative impact of parental conflict on children's emotional development occurs regardless of whether parents are together or separated. Conflict can be extremely stressful for children, who haven't yet developed the skills to cope with these situations effectively. Due to their egocentric cognitive style, pre-school-aged children are particularly prone to self-blame for



"Parents cannot always prevent a separation, but there are things they can do to improve outcomes for their children."

parental conflict and separation, which may contribute to the increased risk of difficulties following separation for children in this age group.

Aspects of parents' own coping can impact on children's adjustment to separation. Parents involved in ongoing intense conflict are often under immense stress themselves, making it harder for them to be as available and responsive to their children's emotions as they might otherwise be, and making it more difficult to parent in a calm and consistent way. It can also be very difficult for parents to respond to their children as they typically would if they are having difficulty managing their own feelings about the separation (e.g. grief and loss, increased anxiety). Other changes that can impact on parents' own stress levels involve changes to their financial situation and their social support network.

Separation involves a massive restructuring of the family unit, which means parents need to renegotiate their roles from romantic partners to co-parenting partners, and to negotiate new boundaries and "rules of engagement" for the sake of their children. With all of the emotions involved in the process of ending the

romantic relationship, this transition is not always easy to make. Children rely on calm and consistent parenting more than ever when they are going through a major life transition, and may display increased anxiety or challenging behaviour if they detect that Mum or Dad are not feeling 100% okay.

The bottom line seems to be that separation may be either beneficial or harmful to children depending on whether the change adds to or decreases the stress in children's lives. This is useful to keep in mind considering that parents cannot always prevent a separation, but there are things they can do to improve outcomes for their children.

What Parents Can Do

- Find regular quiet and calm moments to invite your child to discuss their thoughts and feelings. Let them know that their feelings are valid, and completely understandable under the circumstances. Reassure them that the separation was not their fault.
- Try to maintain family routines and rituals. Support and encourage your child to maintain contact with friends and extended family. Speak to your child's teacher about linking your child with a support person at school (e.g. teacher, counsellor or chaplain).
- It's common for children to have feelings of powerlessness following separation. Offer them appropriate opportunities for choice (e.g. weekend activities). Allow your child to choose some of their favourite toys and possessions between

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Divorce con't

your home and that of your child's other parent. This can also reduce the stress of the transition for your child.

- Regardless of how you now feel about your child's other parent, support your child's relationship with him/her. You can convey this through your comments, your nonverbal communication (e.g. when your child talks about the other parent) and your behaviour (e.g. allowing phone calls to the other parent when your child is with you). Children do better when they have a positive relationship with both parents, particularly when both parents have involvement in the daily parenting tasks.
- Children who become alienated or estranged from one parent are at high risk of adjustment problems. Irrespective of how you feel about the other parent, early intervention with counselling is recommended if your child is rejecting his/her other parent.
- Avoid exposing your child to conflict between you and his/her other parent. As well as keeping tense or conflictual discussions away from the supersonic hearing of your child, work actively on communicating and collaborating with your child's other parent to negotiate new boundaries and find workable ways to resolve conflict. This might require the involvement of a mediator or psychologist.

Some parents struggle with guilt about the impact of their separation on their children. In difficult moments, please remember that it's not the structure of the family, but the quality of relationships that matters when it comes to giving your child the very best start in life.



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