

childPSYCH News

A newsletter for professionals and parents

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through separation and
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Beginning to write



APS Psychologists



Special points of
interest:

- We have a NEW learning centre! Call us now for more information
- At *childpsych* only psychologists who are registered teachers and/or Educational Psychologists will write the report on learning difficulties
- To unsubscribe from this newsletter at any time, either email or call *childpsych*

Nurturing Families Through Separation and Divorce by BelinderLequertier, childpsych staff Clinical Psychologist

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.



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

ticularly prone to self-blame for 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

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 par-

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Divorce con't

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 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.

Beginning to Write

The simple view of writing is that writing is a result of such skills as planning ability and the ability to physically write fast enough. This view believes that good writing comes from the ability to organise our thoughts and then express them in print. As you may be concluding, it is important to teach our children, when they begin to write in school, to think about what they want to say before they then write it. Obviously the underpinning cognitive skills implicated are working memory and expressive language skills. Impairments in these areas can effect writing skill development. So all this makes sense right?

However, some researchers have challenged this view, showing that transcription skills are more important. Transcription skills mean fluent writing is the best predictor of writing quality and length. These researchers argue that up to 66% of good quality writing can be predicted by how fast a student can write! So it seems handwriting is an important part of the curriculum and classroom instruction in the early grades before more complex writing skills such as planning



what you want to write about are taught.

As expected, girls seem to outperform boys in the early grades with handwriting fluency. So what can be done then to ensure that children beginning to write can develop transcription skills?

First of all, children need a chance to develop their visual spatial skills and fine motor skills. Good quality pre-prep instruction is important. Lots of playing with puppets, play dough, ball games and cutting assist with developing fine motor skills. Drawing is related to early writing so encourage your **child to draw**. Let them "write" for you even if it is a bunch of squiggles. Even write for them. Children enjoy writing related to their play so incorporate this as much as possible. Write a letter to Dora!



childpsych is offering this evidence-based working memory training program.

The complete program includes:

- Initial interview
- Start-up session
- Five weeks of training with weekly Coach calls
- Wrap-up meeting
- Six month follow-up interview
- Access to the Cogmed Training Web
- Optional Cogmed Extension Training (12 months)

How long does it take?

The cogmed program consists of 25 training sessions of 30-40 minutes each, done over 5 weeks. It is the intensity of this training schedule that is critical to the program's success. The user/family sets the training schedule with the Cogmed Coach, with plenty of flexibility.

Autism Services

childpsych provides a specialist autism clinic focused on assessment and diagnosis and intervention services. Our autism interventions are delivered by psychologists accredited to work with children with autism spectrum disorders.

- ✓ Assessment and diagnosis of autism
- ✓ Management of children with autism to age 18 years
- ✓ Behavioural interventions, social skills, transition to school, treatment of other conditions such as anxiety, depression
- ✓ Special education development classes and remedial teaching classes

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