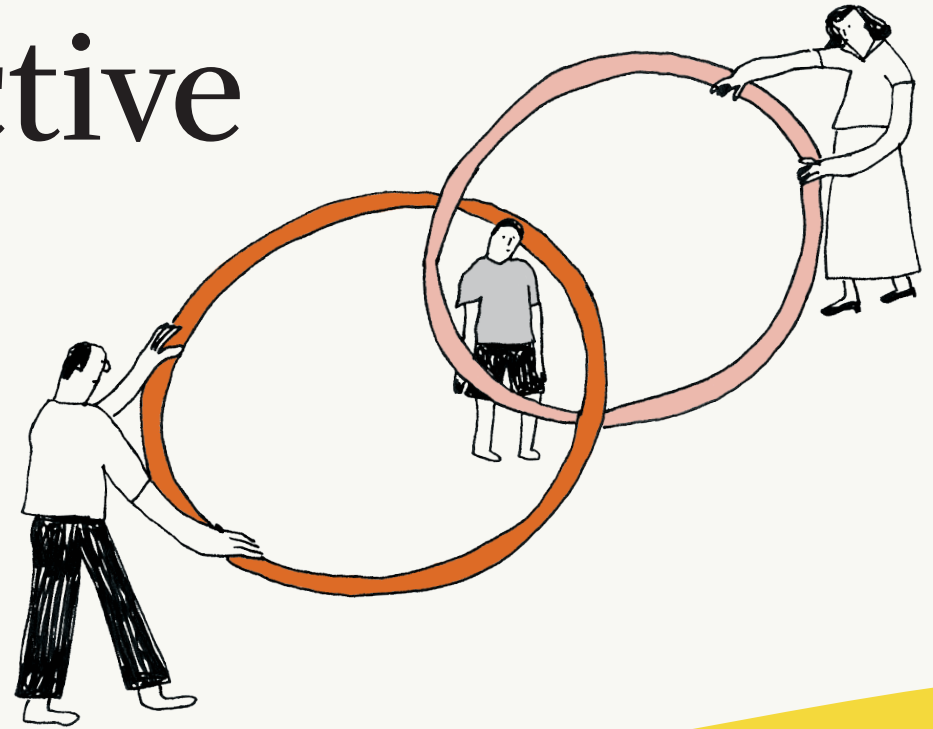


Parent separation from a child's perspective

11 positive ways to help children with their parents parting ways.

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Regardless of the level of dispute, the overwhelming majority of children from separated families love their parents deeply and are highly motivated to continue their relationship with both sides of the family. Even in the most conflicted of homes, children usually have a good understanding of parent strengths and areas of difficulty. They are generally very flexible and forgiving around parent limitations, and are eager to protect and build upon aspects of their relationship with mum and dad that are working well.



1

Emotional suppression

In tense situations, children learn quickly that talking openly about their relationship with the other parent risks placing additional stress upon the family.

For some, any implication that they wish to maintain a meaningful relationship with particular family members risks rejection from one side of the family, and an accompanying escalation in parent-child conflict.

Children often interpret this corrective response as evidence of conditional love, which in turn places them under increased pressure to take sides and mirror the dominant narrative of anger and distrust in each household. The resulting emotional suppression and energy redirected towards self-censorship can be severely debilitating for any child.

2

Grief and loss

It is normal for children to grieve the loss of the original family, even when from a parenting perspective, it wasn't a very good one.

As a result, children are likely to experience a variety of mixed emotions they find overwhelming at times. Mixed emotions can be very confusing and hard for children to think through and explain clearly to others. It is important to remember that children's experiences of grief are no different to that of adults. Children's grief may include feelings of love and hope for reconciliation, expressions of anger and the assigning of blame, as well as feelings of intense sadness and emotional insecurity.

3

Hopes for reconciliation

It is very common for children to wish for their parents to repair their relationship and get back together.

This is often a secret wish that goes unspoken for extended periods of time, resurfacing every few months or several years after the separation itself. This revelation may come as an uncomfortable surprise for many parents who are unsure of how to respond to such disclosures.

Remember, this is a practical statement just as much as it is an emotional protest, and tied up in this wish are children's memories of 'simpler' times, before the changes, when family members did fun things together in one home and life was far less complicated.



4

Feeling caught in the middle

Generally, children hate to see their parents take sides against one another, and they genuinely loath having to choose between two people they love.

Ongoing criticism against loved ones draws children deeper into family disputes. This may result in children distancing themselves from one or both parents in order to relieve their own anxieties and put an end to the fighting. For many families, alliance building can have devastating long-term outcomes. Under intense provocation, parents may feel pressured to justify their actions, react aggressively to perceived criticisms or assign blame upon others in a variety of ways.

Side taking can cause intense distress due to the inevitable emotional suppression and self-censorship involved. Children describe this experience as feeling 'caught in the middle' of their parent's conflict, where their own experiences and perceptions become lost in the hostilities, leaving them feeling they have no one to talk to. Ultimately, a child's alliance with either parent can be unpredictable, resulting in sudden and confusing shifts in loyalties without warning.

5

Expressions of anger & sadness

Even the most optimistic of children are, deep down, likely to recognise that parental reunion is impossible.

What they are trying to express through their anger and sadness is their own sense of frustration and disappointment at the situation they now find themselves in. Until a child feels that their emotional protests have been genuinely acknowledged, they are more likely to develop inflexible thought patterns, be resistant to change and continue to yearn for the past rather than take advantage of new opportunities in the present.

In stark contrast, some children are so relieved by the reduction in parent conflict after separation, they are far happier with their parents leading separate lives and have no desire for either party to reconcile. These children often present as having fewer worries compared to their concerns before the separation.



6

Cognitive distortions

Beware of pessimistic, catastrophic and all or nothing thinking.

Children are very aware of family politics and may try to keep everyone onside by only reporting back what they think each parent wants to hear (the good, the bad or the indifferent). Children under stress are less likely to go against the dominant narrative of the household for obvious reasons. Try to remain as neutral as possible in your responses, while avoiding both overt and covert criticism of the other parent in front of the children.

If you need to debrief or vent your anger, do it away from the kids. Encourage cognitive flexibility in children by acknowledging the positives and reframing family members' polarised positions into more nuanced interpretations. Help children explore areas of 'grey' and support them to feel more comfortable with ambiguity. Recognise what the other parent contributes towards the care of the family, and teach children the art of compromise in everyday life.

7

Distress at handovers

Children's distress before, during and after handovers is often negatively attributed to the child's time spent with the other parent.

While this may be true in some cases, many children find handovers distressing due to an emotionally charged transition between two parents they love. Not only do handovers bring back memories of what was lost; children must endure deep sadness having to say goodbye to one parent, while at the same time experiencing intense joy being reunited with a parent they have been missing.

For children, these mixed emotions can be overwhelming to experience, difficult to process and equally challenging to put into words. In addition, if handovers are marked by increases in parental tension or hostility, this will only add to a child's sense of apprehension and prolong their distress.



8

Parenting arrangements

Despite what you might hear, there are no black and white rules relating to parenting arrangements after separation.

Recommendations around equal shared care, significant time spent with each parent or limited time spent with one parent are highly contentious and emotive topics for both families and professionals. Research is ongoing and ideas will inevitably fluctuate over time.

It is important to remember that each child is unique, having their own thoughts and feelings regarding living arrangements. These thoughts and feelings may be very different from your own. Parents are often surprised to hear that their children are supportive of shared care and eager to see

it work. Other children may need more time to rebuild their relationships within the family and will appreciate a more flexible and responsive arrangement that can accommodate temporary shifts in children's moods and motivations.

Ultimately, children value genuine attempts made to work through differences, and will likely view any examples of active compromise as a step in the right direction (regardless of what is eventually agreed upon). Try to be as adaptable and creative as possible; introduce new living arrangements incrementally and understand that children's needs and wishes will likely change over time.

9

Unrecognised grief

Disenfranchised or unrecognised grief can be a significant reason for children being referred to counselling.

Parents often notice an increase in their child's stress levels, coupled with withdrawal from time spent with the family and a progressive breakdown in communication. This is particularly true for children who feel drawn into family conflict through exposure to high levels of anger, criticism and blame. One exacerbating factor often overlooked in children's grief and is that children are at the mercy of parent decisions, having little choice and control over changes to the family.



10

Parallel parenting

If cooperative parenting is not possible for whatever reason, parallel parenting can be explored as an effective way of managing highly conflicted post separation parenting.

The practice of parallel parenting allows each parent to operate completely independently of one other with minimal to no contact and severely restricted communication. In this way, parallel parenting can be used as a starting point to work incrementally towards more cooperative models of parenting over extended periods of time.

11

Hopes for the future

After separation, children are often at their happiest when they see their parents able to communicate and cooperate without conflict.

Children often say how much they would love to talk openly about their time spent in both households without fear of rejection or triggering off another fight between mum and dad. Ultimately, most children just want to be allowed to love both sides of the family and enjoy their time spent with each parent.

If there has been a significant disruption to the foundation of a parent-child relationship, consider providing children with consistent reminders of the good qualities in the other parent, no matter how small. Where appropriate, help children to understand and forgive, even when there are differences in values, attitudes and beliefs, without judgement or criticism. Support children to maintain hope that trust can be re-built in the future.



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