

# Supporting children through separation

When parents separate it can be difficult for everyone involved. The nature of separation often means that parents do not leave their relationship amiably without emotions making an already testing situation more difficult. With children in tow, separation is not as simple as resolving the loss of hopes and dreams regarding the fallen relationship. Instead it becomes an ever-increasing challenge to balance the children's needs and the demands brought about by the sudden emergence of the new co-parenting relationship. With these thoughts in mind, this article will address the child's needs during separation as well as explore the initial causes of co-parenting successes and/or lack thereof.

## The rare ones

Some children are extraordinarily lucky (in comparison to others) when it comes to having separated parents who get along. Experience often shows that amiable co-parenting relationships are less frequently observed than those with ongoing challenges. While there are any number of reasons why some co-parenting relationships fail (e.g. domestic and family violence, substance abuse, mental health etc.) there are equal reasons why some co-parenting situations succeed.

In order to achieve a successful co-parenting relationship both parents typically possess the mindset that takes responsibility for their own emotions and behaviours. Above all else, these adults typically have the drive to avoid toxic relationships as well as to improve themselves in the form of personal growth. Additionally, they see the wellbeing of their children paramount over all else, thus helping them to push their emotions aside and manage co-parenting discord without allowing children to witness it.

## Piggies in the middle

Children are always the ones who will get caught in the middle of co-parenting duels. Whether parents intend to or not, any conflict between them will be felt and noticed by children. Loyalties mean they do not typically want to displease either parent, thus making it hard for them to understand how to behave, think and feel when one or both parents are openly hostile towards the other.

## Mum and Dad are part of me

Too many times we hear adults say to children, "You look like your dad", or "You have the same colour eyes as your mum", etc. These comments build up a child's understanding that they are parts of their parents and vice versa. For the well-adjusted and secure child these comments help cement their understanding of their identity and how they belong in the world. Ironically, warring co-parents tend to knock over the very pillars which give children a sense of self. While it is unlikely that most parents would go out of their way to psychologically harm their children, hurtful comments about the other parent's downfalls essentially have a negative impact on children when they believe themselves to possess the same traits as their parents. For example, if my dad is stupid then part of me must be stupid too.

## Understanding a child's capacity

If a child was faced with a bullying situation, it is fair to claim that most parents would jump to their child's aid. If for no other reason, parents help children in these types of instances because children do not have the life skills or experience to navigate their way through conflict without explicit support and guidance.

Remarkably, when parents are involved in conflictual co-parenting relationships, one or both parents are less likely to notice that children remain equally incapable of weathering such conflict. The result of this oversight means that some parents make their children the messengers, their confidants about their co-parenting grievances, use children as a sounding board as they pitch snide comments about the other parent, and/or use children as their emotional crutch. While multiple problems arise from such behaviours, the child is the one that suffers the most, mainly because, just like in the bullying instance, children do not have the skills to overcome co-parenting grievance e.g. matters relating finances/child support, living arrangements, parenting agreements, infidelity, or another's inability to manage their own emotions. While it is difficult enough for a growing mind to comprehend and make sense of these matters, there is another factor which makes things more complicated – that being the child's experience of grief and loss.

### **The grief cycle**

The grief cycle is something all people, including children, experience. While the grief cycle encourages a mix of common feelings and responses in all humans, it does not follow a linear process, nor does everyone experience it the same way, for the same length of time or with the same intensity of feelings. Differences experienced from person to person relates to past grief experiences, the gravity of the loss and personality to name a few. Problematic to children's grief is that children relive parents' separation each time they transition from one house to another, thus meaning their experience of grief and loss can be on a constant and unavoidable loop.

Grief and loss does not simply refer to parental separation. For children (and adults), separation marks multiple, compounded losses, for example, loss of routine, family time, activities, a beloved house, schools/friends etc. (if they have to move), financial security, a pet etc. The list goes on and is unique to each person.

Each time a child transitions between homes they need to adapt to a new place which may not necessarily allow them access to their preferred home comforts e.g. familiar room, toys, activities, pet etc. Such a task can create difficult emotions, frequently spurred on by grief and loss, thus making the task of transitioning from one home to another more difficult than adults may comprehend.

When parents see their children off to the other parent's house they experience an adjustment period, however they, more often than not, remain in a place where they have their home comforts to help them when their children are not around. Given the frequency which many children travel between homes, they have less time to process their own grief and loss because it is in constant flux. Just as they settle into a new routine and adjust to being in a new place they transition to the other parent's house and the whole cycle begins again. For this reason it is little wonder that parents often report that children are emotional when they return home from the other parent's house and that their behaviour is less than desirable.

### **Making separation easier on children**

Research tells us that grief has the ability to bestow strong emotions, typically those of anger, denial, disbelief, sadness, and depression (to name a few). Throw in any co-parenting conflict and a child's emotional experience escalates to include confusion, helplessness, guilt, anxiety, frustration, and loneliness (among others). Such a strong concoction of emotions would make it difficult for most adults to withstand. For this reason, parents need to consider various factors that may make separation easier on children, some of which are discussed below.

#### *Avoiding co-parenting conflict*

Thus far it has been highlighted that one of the most difficult things for children to endure is co-parenting conflict. They are still learning how to navigate relationships and overcome conflicts of their own. Their level of maturity (even if they are teenagers) does not dictate their capacity to absorb adult level information. They will always feel loyalty towards both parents and any negativity directed towards the other parent will be difficult for children to comprehend and manage. The result of their age may mean that they will act out and level their own emotions in unhealthy ways. While it may be satisfying (for some) to have someone (even a child) side with them, such an action is inadvertently teaching children that conflict is the result of one person being wrong and another right. Rarely is this the situation. Instead co-parenting conflict (save ongoing abusive tendencies and addiction and mental health factors) is usually a result (at least in part) of one or both parents failing to emotionally leave the relationship. Whatever the reason, seeking help to understand the root of the problem/s may help parents move towards a more amiable co-parenting co-existence.

### *Avoid making children the messengers*

Ways to best help children manage a co-parenting situation is to avoid using children as a message bank. Even in situations where one parent is next to impossible to communicate with, children should not be the fallback strategy. When parents use children as their communication tool, the child will inevitably become caught in the middle when one parent's wishes clash with the other. When parent's wishes are in opposition the child will feel and experience adult emotions as if they are theirs to resolve. Naturally, owning someone else's problems promotes a sense of helplessness, an emotion which can lead to any number of reactions including withdrawal, anger, anxiety or depression.

### *Rules and boundaries*

Keeping parenting expectations as consistent as possible is also necessary. This suggestion does not imply both parents should adopt the same rules and routines. In an ideal world such a feat would be terrific, but most will see this goal as being unrealistic, especially if parents are barely capable of passing children over to each other's care without an argument ensuing. Instead, parents should consider focusing what is occurring on their shift.

Throughout the child's life, parents will have developed a set of behavioural expectations. These expectations will have guided the child to understand how they could and could not behave. Keeping expectations and house rules consistent will go a long way to showing children that part of their life remains predictable. Even when children are going through a hard time they need stability. The best form of stability comes with parents not relaxing rules or granting children passes on account of them going through a tough time. The world does not excuse poor behaviour because people are going through hardship. In fact, more often than not, having to live by the same set of rules helps to develop adults' capacity to manage strong emotions while continuing on in their every-day lives. The end result means that we are in part forced to work through grief and learn how to compartmentalise our emotions in healthy, manageable ways.

### *Care arrangements*

Understanding what works for children can help to determine what care arrangements are agreed upon. Some children are routine orientated. These types of children tend to find regular shifts in environment more difficult than the spontaneous child. While parental needs should be considered to ensure the child-parent relationship can be sustained, it is equally important to consider the child's needs. Figuring out what's best for children can be difficult to ascertain, but using their emotions, mood and adaptability as a guide will help to determine if care

arrangements are benefiting or hindering them. Naturally this point is moot if children are aware of any co-parenting conflict and if they are being swayed to think or talk negatively about the other parent.

Another consideration might regard the feasibility of parenting contact, for example, the goal of having shared care is to spend time with children. Parents who wish to have overnight stays should be ensuring that there are opportunities for quality time. Getting children late at night and then dropping them off early the next day does not accommodate the child's needs of connecting with that parent. If quality time cannot be achieved there may be less point to visits than those who do get quality time. (NOTE: There will be situations where a parent's capacity is limited and narrow time slots are necessary)

### *Children's activities*

As previously mentioned, a child tends to lose a lot more than just their parents living together. To minimise the impacts on a child, parents might consider the benefits of keeping children's out-of-home activities as regular as possible. Not taking children to activities may well upset the other parent but it will not upset the other parent as much as it will the child (even if they do not say it directly). Playing games where children become the ones that miss out can have on-going and long-lasting impacts on a child.

### *Quality time*

Another major consideration to help children overcome parental separation is to make sure that quality time is spent with the children. While there is no suggestion that children should have the ability to commandeer a parent's time 24/7, children will be less likely to see the point in spending time away from one parent if the other parent does not invest time with them. Committing time does not mean taking children out and entertaining them in the presence of others. Instead it is about being present and engaged. It means taking an active interest in children's interests, hobbies and comments as well as avoiding pasttimes that detract away from being present and available e.g. social media, devices, work, or new partners.

### *Being responsible for selected adult behaviours*

Parents who do not commit to their agreed times, are inconsistent in showing up and/or do not make themselves available when children are in their care will often hear that their children do not want to come to their house. In these instances, some parents can be quick to blame the other parent for brainwashing the child/children, but before such accusations are made it is always advisable to check in with oneself and answer the following question honestly – Are they not wanting to come because I am not present (mind and body)? When parents engage with their children and are present, children will more often than not want to spend time with both parents.

### **Summing it up**

Co-parenting relationships pose a plethora of problems. Toxic co-parenting relationships, that is where parents argue and are openly hostile towards the other parent, have far-reaching negative effects on children. Such effects can negatively impact the child and create a range of difficult emotions for children to process, many of which are beyond their capacity to manage independently. Separated parents that can rise above their own broken relationship challenges often have the ability to assess their own behaviour rather than projecting any angst they feel onto the other parent and/or children. Children caught in the middle of parental discord can find it difficult to ascertain how they can cope with such problems. Each parent's DNA contributes to the genetic makeup of children. The result of this fact means that children will possess features and traits that are like one or

both parents. Children build their identity around their looks and the way they behave. They also assign importance to being, in part, like other members of the family. Any negative comments they hear about one of both parents pulls their identify and sense of self out of focus. Children's emotional and cognitive capacities are limited due to their age. Regardless of how mature they may seem, children are not mini-adults. Their ability to process and absorb complicated, adult-related facts is limited. As such, it is suggested parents cease or at the very least limit how much children know about co-parenting challenges and/or an adult's feelings and opinions. When separation occurs, children, like the adults involved, will go through a grieving process. Regardless of age, everyone will likely experience a range of difficult emotions that make accepting the separation difficult. Helping children to overcome grief will rely on the adults around them being able to offer a stable home environment, consistent rules and routines. Additional things can be done to support children through separation, some of which include avoiding making co-parenting conflicts obvious to children, refraining from making children the messengers, making sure care arrangements are consistent and consider children's needs, keeping children's extra-curricular activities consistent, and investing in quality time.

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