

What about the Children?



Relationships Australia.

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“Accept the fact that, however hard you try to build a bright and better future for yourself and your child, there may be times when you make mistakes, or other people let you down, and things go hopelessly wrong.

*When that happens, give in to your emotions!
Sit down and have a good grizzle!
Then go out and celebrate.*

*For when you are right down at rock bottom
there is only one way to go ... UP!”*

Glenda Banks
Helping Your Child Through Separation and Divorce



Introduction

When a separation occurs it is a very painful and distressing time for all concerned.

This booklet is about how you can assist your children to cope with the situation. However, we are aware that you are also coping with a very painful experience, and sometimes it may seem to you that you are coping all on your own; that there is no help from anywhere, not even from the other parent.

Although it is best for children that both parents are involved and eager to do what is best for them, we know that this may not always be the case. We suggest that you read this booklet, and take from it those ideas which you think can assist you to make life better for yourself and for your children and leave the rest.

If you think that it may help, why not get a copy for the other parent? Or perhaps for other people who are involved in the care of your children? Grandparents may also appreciate a copy.

So... you and your partner are separating

A thousand questions go through your head. And one of those questions is, "What about the children?"

- How will you tell them?
- What should you say?
- When should it be done?

At a time when you are most vulnerable and unsure of yourself, you have a most difficult task to accomplish.

You know they will be hurt, worried, confused and angry, and it's the last thing you want for them but it has to be done, and you want to do it in a way that will create the least pain.

How your children will react to your separation and adjust to it will depend upon several things:

- How you cope with the break-up and any ongoing relationships.
- The age and stage of development of the children when you tell them of the separation.
- The temperament of the children - for instance, whether they are easy going or highly-strung.

This little booklet will give you valuable hints for working through the minefield.

How you can cope with the break-up

Some people have said that separating is “worse than if a partner dies - they are always there in your face reminding you of a failure”.

For others, it is an enormous relief, and the peace of mind that follows can hardly be described.

Whether you fall into the former or the latter category, or somewhere in between, you need to cope with the event in the best way possible.

Separation and divorce are always painful, and it takes quite a time for people to heal. Give yourself at least 18 months, but don't be surprised if it takes longer.

As a parent, it is important that you take care of yourself at this time so that you are able to be there for your children when they need you. There are a number of things you can do to help yourself through this tough time:

Don't get stuck

Unsticking yourself is a must! You always know when you're stuck because you will feel -

- out of control
- helpless
- hopeless

and you will find yourself blaming the other person for your predicament.

When this happens, you have given control of your life to someone else. So, begin to think about how you can take control of YOU.

It's not wise to try to make someone else do what you want - so, what are your options?

Make a list - then talk about these with a friend, look at the consequences should you follow through with each one, and finally make a decision.

Make sure they are decisions which will be helping you in the long run. Choosing well will help you to rebuild your life and feel confident, motivated and more positive.

Most people separating will feel angry, and anger can be useful if it is used positively. How you respond is your responsibility; if you respond normally with anger which is designed to hurt or frighten others, this won't give you what you want. It may be useful to talk with someone who can help - like a counsellor at Relationships Australia. In the long run, it is far better to behave in respectful ways towards your ex-partner, even if you feel you are the aggrieved party. When you change angry, destructive behaviour and avoid having your “angry buttons”

pressed, you're in control of you, and this can have a calming effect on everyone, including - and especially - your children.

If you think you are not behaving in a reasonable, rational way, check it out with someone who will give you an honest appraisal. (Don't use your best friend, who will tell you what s/he thinks you'll want to hear!)

Sleeping can be difficult for some people, too; this is a normal part of the process of separating, but if it becomes a problem and you can't manage your daily life, see your doctor or healthcare professional.

Don't forget to eat properly. If you aren't much of a cook, eat fruit and vegetables, which don't need cooking.

Talk. Talk to friends and family. Don't use the children as a support or sounding board. As their parent, you have to be there to support them, not have them support you. Find support from others, socialise, even when it's difficult. This is an important way of working through the grief.

Find other ways to help yourself - listen to music, go for walks, take long baths, have fun with your children.



Issues to discuss with the other parent

When separation becomes inevitable, there are a number of issues regarding the wellbeing of your children which need talking about. One such topic is their day-to-day care.

Where are the children to live and where are they going to school? It is best for parents to decide this for younger children; however, the wishes of children should always be taken into consideration when making this decision.

Changes to living arrangements can be made later if things don't work out. But normally life changes, anyway, as children grow older and parents' lives move on. So there are bound to be times when these arrangements will need reviewing.

This can be a difficult issue to manage on your own, and an independent counsellor, or mediator, at Relationships Australia can make the process easier for both parties. A Parenting Plan can be discussed in which everyone's needs are considered, and then information can be given about the ways in which the arrangements can be formalised.

Successful co-operative parenting, once you have separated, is very important and is one of the most valuable things you can give to your children to compensate for not having the family living together.

Explaining the separation to the children

Telling the children you are separating won't be easy, either, but it needs to be done.

Don't tell them until you are both composed and can present a united and reassuring front.

Tell the children something before you actually separate so that things can sink in.

If you can tell the children together, do so. Make sure you both know what's going to be said beforehand. You will need time to answer questions and reassure the children.

Acknowledge that it's been a difficult decision to make and that it will be hard for everyone in the family to get used to.

Explain that, while you can no longer live together as husband and wife, you will always be their parents.

With older children, talking generally about adult love and marriage can help them appreciate the complexities of relationships and respect the way their parents have handled the break-up.

Try to convey the reason for separation in a simple way; leave out the bits which blame the other parent.

Make statements like, “We like one another in some ways, but can’t live with each other”.

Say that some of the things that happened between you are difficult to explain and that you know it won’t be easy for them to understand.

Glenda Banks, in her book ‘Helping Your Child Through Separation and Divorce’, has a very good rule of thumb...

“Don’t bite off more than your child can swallow.” Make sure you tell them that they are not to blame for the separation. Give lots of reassurance that you will always be their parents and will always love them. Also tell them that nothing they can do will change the situation.

Talk about the living arrangements; be positive. Talk about how the parent who is to move away will maintain contact - by phone calls, letters, visits, videos, emails, faxes.

Be prepared to discuss things like:

- What will become of birthday and Christmas celebrations?
- Will both parents go to special school events?
- How will the other parent receive invitations?
- What will happen during holidays?

Remember to say that good things, as well as sad, will result from the separation, and talk about the positive things.

At first you may not get much of a reaction; they may need time for the news to sink in; but be prepared for tears and anger, for wanting to talk and not wanting to talk. In short, be prepared for a variety of responses and listen to your children.

The way you and your ex-partner behave will have an impact on your children’s ability to adjust well to the separation, now and in the future.

What to expect

No matter what age your children are, they will be affected emotionally by the separation and will need your understanding and support.

It will take time for them, and you, to adjust to the loss of the family living together, even if things at home have been unpleasant through arguments or angry silences.

Preschool, 0-5 years

Small children are less able to understand what is going on. They are very dependent on their parents and will most likely want to stay close to the parent with whom they have most contact.

Such children are likely to:

- be confused and worried about whether they have done something to cause the separation
- fret for the parent who has gone and wonder whether Daddy or Mummy still loves them
- fantasise what they don't understand, and make up things from their own experience which may cause them great distress.

For example, they may worry that they will be abandoned when you go and leave them for a while, or that you won't be there when they wake up.

Such children are likely to show their distress by:

- having trouble sleeping
- being clingy or withdrawing
- wetting their pants when normally they are toilet-trained
- being upset when they return from seeing the parent they are not living with the majority of the time
- turning more to security blankets or soft toys for comfort
- using baby talk, when normally they are able to speak quite well.

Early Primary, 5-8 years

Children this age can understand that parents operate separately from them. They are more able to talk about their feelings, but have difficulty expressing their worries, and tend to demonstrate them through undesirable behaviour.

Such children are likely to be:

- worried that they will have to choose between parents
- wondering what will happen next
- fearful they might be the cause of the separation
- feeling responsible for looking after others' feelings - particularly parents
- longing to get parents back together
- blaming themselves for the break-up
- afraid they will be replaced
- very sad.

Such children are likely to show their distress by:

- being reluctant and distressed to leave the other parent at the end of a visit
- behaving badly by being abnormally angry, aggressive and restless
- withdrawing and dreaming
- exhibiting baby behaviours
- wanting to stay home to be near the parent with whom they spend most time
- asking lots of questions and appearing anxious.



Upper Primary, 8-12 years

Children in this age bracket find separation extraordinarily difficult. They know what is going on, but don't know how to handle it. They can understand why parents can be angry with each other, and they don't seem to blame themselves for what's happened.

Such children are likely to be:

- afraid of being excluded from decision-making
- just plain angry
- fearful and unsure of their place in the world
- worried about being abandoned
- ashamed about what's happened
- responsible for looking after one or both parents
- afraid of being asked who they want to live with.

Such children are likely to show their distress by:

- being angry and bossy with you
- missing the other parent intensely
- being judgemental about who is the bad parent
- playing one parent off against the other
- having stomach-aches and headaches so they can stay home from school
- frequently lying
- stealing
- having their school performance drop
- finding it difficult to talk about what has happened with others
- trying to run away.

Adolescents, 12-16 years

In many ways, adolescents are independent of their parents and capable of seeing that parent's decisions are quite separate from themselves.

They will struggle, as younger children, to work out how to react to the news of their parents' separation.

Often, however, they are aware that their parents' relationship is poor, and the news can come as a relief.

Adolescents are likely to be:

- acutely aware of the reality of the separation
- angry and embarrassed
- fearful and uncertain of what will happen to them
- worried about their parents' emotional wellbeing
- experiencing a conflict of loyalty.

Adolescents are likely to show their distress by:

- lacking concentration at school
- blaming parents for separation
- increased acting out behaviour - e.g. going out without permission, refusing to co-operate
- taking on parent concerns
- withdrawing from the family.



What you can do to help?

• **Preschool, 0-5 years**

- Provide lots of closeness and cuddles, and not just when they look distressed.
- Tell them you love them and won't leave them.
- Don't get mad if they wet the bed or regress and use baby talk.
- Be patient if they can't sleep.
- Make sure you tell them about the new living arrangements and how things will work – e.g. when they will see the other parent.
- Tell the children in advance what will happen, and when.
- Avoid putting the other parent down.
- Remember - they, too, are grieving.

• **Early Primary, 5-8 years**

- Reassure them about the other parent's love and that it will be forever.
- Reassure them that they won't have to choose between you and the other parent.
- Provide opportunity to talk about the anger and loneliness they may feel.
- Give lots of closeness and cuddles if they look for it (and even when they don't).
- Talk with them about their desire to get their parents back together again.
- Be understanding if they reject you at times.
- Avoid putting the other parent down.

• **Upper Primary, 8-12 years**

- Don't ask them who they want to live with.
- Give opportunity for them to talk about what is happening.
- When organising parenting arrangements, keep in mind their social and sporting activities.
- Talk with them about the new living arrangements.
- Answer questions honestly, even if they seem silly.
- Spell out that they are not responsible for you.
- Provide comfort and time to talk about their fears and concerns.
- Avoid putting the other parent down.

Adolescents, 12-16 years

- Be prepared to listen and talk with them.
- Don't make them your confidant.
- Give them time and space to work out their own reactions to the separation.
- Avoid putting the other parent down.

Although it may be difficult or painful for both parents, it is very important that contact be established between the children and the parent with whom they are not going to be living as soon as possible. Even if arrangements are only temporary, children need to know in concrete terms that both parents are there for them at this time.

Make sure you tell the children that they are not to blame for the separation and assure them that both parents love them and that this will always be the case. Whatever you do, don't criticise the other parent in front of your children, and don't pump them for information about what the other parent is doing or saying. Let the children know how important you think it is to have an ongoing relationship with the other parent. And let the children see you behave in a respectful and positive way with each other.

Finding time to talk with, and listen to, your children will be helpful to them. They need to know that, even though you are distressed at times, life will improve and you are handling things. Children will need time to talk about their feelings - maybe to talk about the other parent. This might be difficult for you, but it is important for the children that you can listen and understand.

Children need to feel secure, and you can provide this by maintaining clear and firm guidelines around what is acceptable behaviour. Your normally honest 8-year-old may begin to lie or steal because of what is happening. But don't allow a behaviour that is not normally tolerated to be overlooked; in the long run, that won't help your child or you. Fair and consistent discipline is important at any time.

Don't use the children as a "post-box", sending messages through them to the other parent. Keep arguments with the other parent private. Talk with other adults when you are upset and angry, rather than discussing the "ins and outs" with the children.

Do talk with the children's teachers, and any other adults who have responsibility for the children, as this will help them to make sense of any unusual behaviour that occurs.

It is important for parents to remember that children will feel caught, and can be seriously scarred emotionally, if they are:

- asked to carry messages between parents, especially hostile ones
- asked intrusive questions about the other parent
- made to feel that they have to hide information
- made to feel that they have to hide their feelings about the other parent.

Ground rules for parenting successfully after separation

Respect each other's privacy; don't interfere in the other's household.

- Extend common courtesy and manners when you meet, as you would to a colleague or acquaintance.
- Make appointments to discuss things. It could be useful to meet on neutral ground, like a coffee shop. Sometimes it's easier to stay calm in a public place.
- Don't hold anger in, but do avoid physical conflict and fighting about the children in front of them. Bear in mind that your children will benefit from a good resolution to your differences.
- Search for solutions, not fault. If you both think you can not do it on your own, find someone who has the skill to mediate.
- Explain to the children how you both have decided to settle the differences. Children need to know.
- Give your ex-partner the benefit of the doubt; don't make assumptions based on what the children have said. Check things out calmly with your ex-partner.
- Be businesslike; keep your feelings in check; evaluate your ex-partner's behaviour, not by how you feel but by how businesslike it is.
- Be trustworthy; follow through on your agreements. Once arrangements for the children are in place... **STICK TO THEM!** Children need as much certainty as their parents can give them at a time like this.
- Concentrate on your own relationship with the children. Let your ex-partner parent in his or her own way.
- Put things in writing; don't assume. Make sure agreements and plans are explicit and detailed as to time, place, cost, and so on. Make the pledge never to take a child away, or to use the children as ammunition, to hurt the other parent.

Issues of safety

When couples separate, family violence may be an issue. Professional help and advice is recommended.

Top mistakes separated/divorced parents make

Mistake No. 1

Failing to tell your children about the impending separation/divorce. This may lead to children imagining the very worst about their parents' relationship and what will happen to them.

Mistake No.2

Neglecting to reassure children that they were not to blame for the break-up.

Mistake No. 3

Bickering in the children's hearing. Children may respond to the fears and anxiety that this causes by becoming difficult, shy, morose or angry.

Mistake No. 4

Speaking contemptuously of the absent partner. Telling children, "Your father is a slob", or "Your mother is a fool", has a devastating effect on children.

Mistake No. 5

Using your children for your own ends by asking them to spy on the other parent, or using them as post-boxes and sending messages to the other parent through them.

Mistake No. 6

Encouraging children to take sides with you against the other parent, or telling them, "I still love him, but he doesn't love me", or "I want to keep the house for you kids, but she wants to sell it".

Mistake No. 7

Abruptly upsetting the children's routine by moving house and school. The shock of separation/divorce is lessened for youngsters who continue to live in the same house and attend the same school. If this is not possible, talk to the children about what is going to happen.

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- Information and writings from: *The Family Court of Australia*
- Child Inclusive Practice In Family and Child Counselling and Family and Child Mediation. A Report by *Strategic Partners Pty Ltd* for the Family Relationships Branch of the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, 1999.
- Mom's House, Dad's House - Making Shared Custody Work. *Isolina Ricci. Collier Books. 1982.*
- Helping Your Child through Separation and Divorce. *Glenda Banks. Dove. 1981.*

There is a wide range of books available for both parents and children on this topic.

If you require assistance, either in knowing where to purchase books, or for the more complex and important matter of how you cope with your situation and that of your children, contact your local Relationships Australia office by ringing **1300 364 277**.

All Relationships Australia offices throughout the country have counselling services, mediation services and group programs which may be of help to you at this time.



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www.relationships.org.au

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