

Fact Sheet

Supporting Your Child Through Parental Separation

Understanding Parental Separation

Parental separation occurs when two parents decide they will no longer remain together, and often, it brings uncertainty, sadness, and a sense of loss. It is a major life change - not only for you, but also for your child.

As a parent, it's important to recognise that while this time may feel overwhelming, it also offers a chance to show your child that even through change, they are deeply loved and cared for by both parents. The way you handle the separation will greatly influence how your child adjusts - both now and into adulthood.

Emotional Responses You May See in Your Child

Children experience parental separation differently depending on their age, personality, and the circumstances around the separation.

It's common for children to feel:

- **Confusion** – They may struggle to understand why things are changing.
- **Sadness** – They may mourn the loss of the family structure they once knew.
- **Anxiety** – They may worry about living arrangements, school, holidays, and friendships.
- **Anger** – They may direct anger toward one or both parents, siblings, or even themselves.
- **Guilt** – Some children, especially younger ones, may wrongly believe the separation is somehow their fault.
- **Relief** – If there was significant conflict or tension at home, some children may feel a sense of calm after the separation.

Common Behaviours to Expect

Children may not always have the words to express how they feel, and instead, their behaviour can be seen as a form of communication. Some behaviours could include:



Mood Swings – Frequent emotional outbursts, irritability, or unpredictable shifts in mood.



Sleep Disturbances - Trouble falling asleep, nightmares, bedwetting (especially in younger children), or sleeping excessively.



Withdrawal – Loss of interest in friends, family activities, or hobbies they used to enjoy.



Risky Behaviours – Particularly in teenagers, experimenting with alcohol, drugs, or reckless behaviour as a way to cope.



Appetite Changes – Either eating significantly more or less than usual.



Social Avoidance - Hesitation or refusal to engage in school or extracurricular activities.

How You Can Support Your Child

Your steady presence and thoughtful actions can make all the difference. Here's what you can do:

1

Offer Unwavering Reassurance

- Tell your child often - in words and actions - that they are loved, valued, and not to blame. Children need repeated reminders of their security during times of change. "No matter what happens between us, we both love you and will always be here for you."

2

Be Respectful of the Other Parent

- Speak kindly (or at least neutrally) about your child's other parent, even if you're hurt or angry.
- Criticism, sarcasm, or blame can make your child feel torn, guilty, and stressed. Think of it this way: your child is made up of both of you. Speaking badly about the other parent can feel like speaking badly about them.

3

Open the Door to Feelings

- Give your child permission to feel however they feel - without judgment.
- Allow sadness, anger, confusion, and even joy without rushing to "fix" it. Say things like, "It's okay to feel upset. I'm here to listen."

4

Where possible, avoid conflict in front of your child

- Arguments, tension, or legal battles should happen away from your child's ears and eyes.
- Children often internalize conflict as something they caused or must fix. A peaceful environment promotes emotional healing and resilience.

5

Communicate with the important people in your child's life

- Inform teachers, coaches, and other caregivers about the separation. This helps them be extra supportive if they notice changes in your child's mood, behaviour, or academic performance.

6

Maintain Consistent Routines

- Predictability helps children feel secure.
- Where possible, keep mealtimes, bedtimes, school schedules, and activities steady. Small routines create a sense of stability when the bigger picture feels uncertain.

7

Use Creative Expression

- Art, music, storytelling, and play can offer powerful outlets for children to explore and express difficult emotions. You might encourage them to keep a feelings journal, create artwork, or build things with blocks or clay.

How Separation Affects Different Ages (And How You Can Help)

0-2

Infants (0-2 years)

- **Impact:** Babies can't understand words, but they deeply sense emotional tones and stress.
- **Support:** Maintain consistent feeding, sleeping, and soothing routines. Offer lots of physical affection (cuddling, holding, rocking).

2-4

Toddlers (2-4 years)

- **Impact:** Toddlers notice a missing parent but don't understand why. They may regress (e.g., tantrums, bedwetting).
- **Support:** Keep explanations simple: "Mummy and Daddy live in different houses now, but we both love you very much." Offer comfort items like a special blanket or stuffed toy.

4-6

Preschoolers (4-6 years)

- **Impact:** Preschoolers often blame themselves for the separation. They may express anger or sadness through play.
- **Support:** Reassure them it's not their fault. Play with them, listen carefully, and use simple drawings or books about separation.

6-12

School-Aged Children (6-12 years)

- **Impact:** Children this age worry about practicalities — "Will I still see Dad every week?" "Do I have to move?"
- **Support:** Keep them informed about changes. Answer their questions honestly in an age-appropriate manner. Help them maintain friendships, sports, and school activities.

12-18

Adolescents (12-18 years)

- **Impact:** Teens understand the complexities of separation but often experience anger, sadness, guilt, or loyalty conflicts. They may want to "take sides" or seem emotionally distant.
- **Support:** Respect their need for independence while staying emotionally present. Avoid making them your confidant or messenger. Encourage healthy outlets like sports, art, or therapy.

Key Reminders for Parents

- Children need permission to love both parents - they should never feel they have to pick a side.
- Stay respectful toward the other parent, even when it's hard. It creates emotional safety for your child.
- Avoid using your child as a messenger - keep adult communications between adults.
- Listen with patience - let them express feelings without judgment or fixing.

Separation is tough, but it can also be a time to show your child resilience, unconditional love, and emotional safety. Seeking support from a counsellor or therapist can be incredibly valuable for both you and your child during this time.