

Promoting children's wellbeing and protecting them from negative consequences of the separation

Separation and divorce are common in Australian society. Today, almost 40% of Australian children can expect to spend time in a family form which differs from the traditional nuclear family ('biological mother, father and children') (Baxter, 2016a).

Despite separation becoming much more common for Australian families, it can still represent a major life stressor for the people involved.



Tips for separated parents

This information sheet provides advice for parents around how to make separation less stressful for all concerned, especially children.¹

In general, the things that help children's wellbeing following separation are the same things that work in any family: good quality parenting, supportive relationships with parents, low conflict between the child's parents and good communication. Here are some specific things you can do:

Maintain warm, responsive and supportive relationships with your children

- Help children to see that they can be loved and cared for even if their parents live apart.
- Let children know that you are there for them and will listen to their needs.
- Be nurturing and kind. Give lots of cuddles, smiles and eye contact. Remind them often how much you love them.
- Show them that you enjoy their company. Show them you are happy to see them when they return home or when you collect them from school or childcare.
- Take an interest in what's going on in your child's/children's life. Encourage them to talk about what they like and don't like.
- Keep up regular contact (by phone or email etc) with your children even if they aren't living with you – this can help in maintaining close relationships (especially if one parent lives a distance away).
- Find some time for 'one-on-one's, where you spend time just with one child doing something that you both enjoy, like reading together or playing a game.

Maintain routines and boundaries

- Maintain as much normality in the child's life as possible – minimise changes in schooling, friendship groups, and daily routines.
- Keep some family rituals, such as the way you wake your children up in the morning or what you say to them at bedtime. These will give your children lots of reassurance.
- Let your children know, clearly and simply, which rules apply when they are in your care. It's OK for your rules to be different from the other parent's – children can learn that different people have different rules.
- Maintain consistent and fair rules, expectations and boundaries with your children to help them feel safe and secure. If children have had some part in discussing the rules, they will be more likely to follow them.
- If your children spend time with the other parent, focus on resuming the usual family routines to help restore your child's sense of safety on their return. It may take children several days to settle after a visit – remember they are trying to learn to work within two different homes and often two sets of family rules – be patient and just support and encourage them.

¹ Given the high rates of family violence in Australia, family violence is likely to be a main contributor to many separations. Refer to the APS information sheet on *Promoting children's wellbeing in the context of separation and family violence* for more specific information.



Talk about difficult things

There can be some tough conversations around the time of separating, and children need your help to make sense of the changes in the family, and about everyone's feelings.

- Listen to what your children are thinking or feeling, and help them to put words to their feelings. Let them know that it's ok to feel that way.
- Help them to understand that the separation is not their fault.
- If they see you being upset, let them know that you love them and that the way you are feeling is not because of them. Reassure them that things will get better.
- Encourage your children to identify other trusted friends or relatives that they could talk with if they are needing someone other than you to chat to.
- Prepare your child for comments from other children about the separation.
- Brainstorm with your child some ways of coping for when things are tough, like talking with others about what's going on, or doing some pleasurable activities to give you a break from worrying.
- Protect your children from your adult concerns. Find your own support people to talk things over with, rather than your children.

Tune in to your particular child's needs

Children have all got different capacities to cope with change depending on their age, temperament and personality.

- Think about your child's/children's capacities to cope with change when deciding on post-separation parenting plans.
- Consider things like:
 - how outgoing and adaptable they are
 - how good are they at managing their own feelings and behaviour
 - how fearful are they of new situations and of change.
- Help children to regulate their feelings if they need to. Parents can do this by asking their children how they are feeling, helping children to put words to feelings, letting them know that you understand how they are feeling, and that their feelings are normal. You can also teach them calming self-talk (e.g., 'I'm ok', 'I can calm down') and relaxation skills, like letting their bodies go soft and floppy, and slowing down their breathing like a sleepy dog lying in front of a warm fire.
- Think about delaying further transitions (except if needed for safety) so that children are not overwhelmed by too many changes all at once. Adjusting to new people joining the family can be as difficult as parental separation.
- Expect different reactions to the separation depending on the age of your child/ren.
 - Young children are likely to show their anxiety about changes by irritability, poor sleep-wake rhythms, separation anxiety or feeding disturbances. Maintaining a sensitive and responsive style of parenting will help young children from feeling insecure.



- If primary school age children show increases in behaviour problems, difficulties concentrating, or problems with peers, remember this may reflect their stress and confusion. Help them to understand that the separation is not their fault, and that they can be loved and cared for even if their parents live apart.
- For adolescents, try to maintain strong supportive bonds to avoid them moving away from the family (emotionally and/or physically) and relying too much on peers for support. Recognise their need for flexibility in parenting arrangements to allow them to participate in normal adolescent social activities and school events.
- Let the school/childcare know that you have separated so they can be aware that these changes may be affecting your child's behaviour.

Work hard to maintain a cooperative relationship with the child's/ children's other parent (if safe to do so)

- Support the other parent in maintaining (or building) a strong relationship with the children if they are motivated to do so – unless this is not safe.
- (Note that family violence is likely to make it impossible and unsafe to have a cooperative relationship following separation. Refer to the APS information sheet on Promoting children's wellbeing in the context of separation and family violence for more information).
- Respect the other parent's continued shared responsibility for children.
- Be proactive in attempting calm, rational conflict resolution so you can have shared decision making with the other parent.
- Accept that the other parent may have a different parenting style to you. As long as your children are safe and secure, then different approaches and styles can work – they can even help your children to understand that different rules apply for different situations.
- Respect children's need to continue their relationship with extended family on both sides of the family, if safe to do so, and support them to do this.

Avoid exposing children to serious conflict between parents

Being exposed to chronic conflict between parents is detrimental to children. Serious parental conflict is marked by some or all of the following behaviours: high degrees of anger and distrust, mutual verbal abuse, frequent or acute difficulty in communicating about and cooperating in the care of their children, and sabotaging of the child's relationship with the other parent.

- Help children to understand that they are not to blame for conflict between their parents.
- Find ways to make your children's needs a top priority and learn to parent effectively even if you do have conflict with your ex-partner.
- Avoid blaming, denigrating or criticising the other parent in front of your children, or on social media that your children might access now or in the future.
- Try to stay positive, friendly and non-judgmental about the other parent, whatever the circumstances.
- Avoid using the children to pass messages to the other parent.
- Be careful not to encourage your children to take sides against the other parent.



- Even if you disagree with the other parent, you can still use good communication strategies such as listening carefully and speaking to each other respectfully so you can resolve your differences. These strategies are also valuable life skills for children, and can teach them that not all conflict is destructive, and that conflict can often be resolved respectfully.
- If it's hard to talk, try using SMS, email, or one of the online parent communication tools (e.g., My Family Wizard) to relay important information about your children.
- Let your children know you understand their feelings and affection for the other parent.
- Let your children hear about some of the good parts of the relationship that you had with the other parent.
- Seek professional assistance if conflict persists.

Seek help if you are dealing with a violent or abusive (ex)-partner

Family violence is defined as any violent, threatening or other behaviour by a person that coerces or controls a member of the person's family, or causes the family member to be fearful. As well as physical violence, such behaviour also includes emotional, verbal, sexual, spiritual, and economic abuse, as well as withholding financial support, preventing contact with friends and family, abusing children, threats and stalking.

The use of violence by a parent towards their partner/the other parent is highly damaging to children. Children's wellbeing improves when removed from a situation characterised by emotional, verbal or physical violence. However the effects of family violence can continue to take their toll, even after the parents' relationship has ended. Family violence can also worsen or even happen for the first time at the point of separation.

Remember, while you do have a responsibility to protect your children as best you can, you are not responsible for your ex-partner's behaviour.

The safety of all concerned is a priority during and post separation. If a family member's actions threaten or frighten you, do seek help (LIFELINE, 1800RESPECT, www.whiteribbon.org.au/find-help/domestic-violence-hotlines/).

The APS information sheet on *Promoting children's wellbeing in the context of separation and family violence* provides tips for how to parent children when you have left a violent partner.

Negotiate shared care arrangements carefully depending on the children's needs

Shared parenting not only means shared responsibility for children, but also involves the child spending substantial and significant time with each parent. Shared parenting is currently supported in the Family Law Act², except in cases of violence, child abuse or neglect, or when otherwise not in the best interests of the child or infant.

² The recent Commonwealth Report "A better family law system to support and protect those affected by family violence" (2017) makes multiple recommendations around amending the Family Law Act, importantly Recommendation 19 about removing the presumption of equal shared parental responsibility.



- Actual parenting arrangements, however, are diverse and changeable. Equally shared care is only experienced by about one in five children, who tend to be of school age, and shared care families are more likely to have a cooperative relationship and live in closer proximity to each other (among other factors). There is evidence that shared care in such circumstances can be positive for children.

Setting up shared care arrangements can be stressful for everyone involved and there may be legal arrangements to be considered. (Victims of family violence should particularly seek legal advice prior to formalising any parenting agreements, and should contact a specialist family violence service for support to navigate informal contact arrangements, mediation and legal pathways).

It is important that children's needs are the focus, and that each parent's pre-existing relationship with the children is considered, as well as their capacity to provide for the children's needs. Both parents need to be flexible as the family's needs change.

- Consider children's ages when developing workable shared time arrangements that are in children's best interests.
- Be prepared to modify shared time arrangements as children's needs change.
- Recognise that very young children may have difficulty coping with extended time away from their primary caregiver.
- Consult with your older children about how much time they will spend with you or their other parent. Recognise that adolescents need to be able to maintain their peer relationships and that this may influence where they want live.
- From a child's point of view, it is important to work out what sort of support is needed from each parent, and then fit the parenting arrangement to those needs.

Use mediation rather than litigation to resolve problems and create solutions

Litigation is often lengthy, sometimes financially costly, often focused more on parents' wishes than children's needs, and often exacerbates rather than resolves inter-parent conflict. Mediation, on the other hand, can increase mutual understanding and focus more clearly on children's needs.

- Make decisions that are in children's best interests. It is important to remain aware that in the Family Court, children have rights and parents have responsibilities to make good decisions about them, care for them, and protect them from harm.
- Seek child-inclusive or child-focused mediation to help you with the separation. These forms of mediation help parents to focus on the needs of their children.
- Note that mediation of any kind, including child-inclusive and child-focused mediation, may be inappropriate or require special support in the context of ongoing risk of violence or abuse. (Refer to the APS information sheet on Promoting children's wellbeing in the context of separation and family violence for more information).



Be mindful of the timing of new transitions

New transitions like moving schools, re-partnering, the addition of step siblings, forming blended families, and moving house or towns can be stressful for children, especially if they occur soon after the initial separation. Some of these changes can arouse a child's fears of being supplanted in their parents' affections, and require a whole new set of adjustments in life.

- Think carefully about your children's needs in considering the timing and process of such transitions.
- Where possible, delay some of these new transitions to give time for children to adjust to the initial separation and new routines.
- Make use of available services that help children and parents to adjust to separation if needed.

Look after yourself

Separation can be an extremely painful and difficult process. Being away from your children, particularly if they are very young, can also be very hard to adjust to. On top of the multiple losses and changes that come with separation, social and cultural factors such as religious beliefs about marriage and culturally-based stigma associated with separation can be added pressures on separating parents and their children. There are also practical realities about being a single parent that can be very difficult, like no longer having the other parent around as a back-up, being the sole adult 'on duty' all the time, and perhaps feeling exhausted and overwhelmed.

- Allow time to come to terms with feelings of loss and grief.
- Develop strategies to help yourself cope with the new demands and stressors of separation and parenting on your own, like healthy routines, relaxation, yoga, meditation, or exercise.
- Plan ahead so you can cope during times when your children are not with you.
- Seek support from family and friends who care about you and can provide practical assistance as well as emotional support.
- Try not to let your own problems result in irritation, neglect or inconsistency in how you relate to your children.
- Keep your own physical health in mind, for example by eating well, getting enough sleep, and keeping up some physical exercise, even if it's just walking, playing games with the children, or picking up the speed of your usual activities.
- Make connections with other parents, including via online forums and social networking sites, and be open to finding new friends.
- Seek professional support if needed.



Stay positive!

- Don't despair – most children manage the separation experience with relatively mild and temporary adjustment reactions.
- Children are often more resilient than we give them credit for.
- Separation doesn't have to be harmful for children in the long run.
- Remind children (and tell yourself) that there is no 'one-size-fits-all' definition of a family and that families come in all shapes and sizes.
- If appropriate, set some new directions in your family by creating some new routines and rituals together.
- Go easy on yourself – parenting on your own can often mean parenting under pressure. When you have less time and more stress in your life, you tend to have less patience.
- It's time to seek help if you are finding it difficult to keep your cool or are using discipline too harshly.

Where to get help

- APS Psychologists. To talk to an APS psychologist, ask your GP for a referral, phone the APS Find a Psychologist service on 1800 333 497, or go to the APS website: www.findapsychologist.org.au
- **Relationships Australia** provides relationship support services for individuals, families and communities to help build positive and respectful relationships. They have also developed a useful guide for women on how to stay safe during and after separation.
- Council of Single Mothers website: <http://csmc.org.au/>
- For single or separated Dads: Mensline: <https://mensline.org.au/tips-and-tools/parenting-tips-separated-dads/>
- No To Violence: <http://www.ntv.org.au/get-help/behaviour-causing-problems/>
- If you are afraid of your ex-partner or are experiencing family violence, contact 1800RESPECT for counselling and advice. <https://www.1800respect.org.au/>
- **If you are in immediate danger** call 000 and ask for police assistance.