

When parents separate

Bella's mum was worried that her 10-year-old daughter was not coping well with her parents' divorce. Bella had been a great support for her mum when her dad first left, helping around the house and with the younger children. Now that her mum is feeling better, Bella spends more time in her room and doesn't want to talk so much. She goes to her dad's for visits on the weekends but, lately, she is very grumpy when she comes home. If Bella's mum asks how the weekend was she just shrugs.

When she asked, "What's wrong?" Bella said, "Nothing." But she didn't look happy. This time Bella's mum asked again: "Bella, are you sure there's nothing wrong? You don't look happy. What's up?" Bella sighed, "Dad's got a new girlfriend," she said. "Now he'll hardly have any time left for me."

When parents separate it is stressful for everybody, but it affects parents and children differently. For parents, separation signals the end of the relationship with their primary partner and a change in the parenting role. For most children relationships with both parents continue, but there are often big changes and strong feelings.

Though distress is unavoidable when families break up, most children recover without long-term negative effects. You can help children cope by reassuring and supporting them while they adjust to the separation.

How children react

Sometimes children talk about their strong feelings, but often the way they feel comes out in their behaviour. They may become anxious and want to stay close to their parents. They may be angry or get into conflicts with others more than usual. These are reactions to the sense of loss and powerlessness that most children feel when their parents separate and their family changes.

Some children try really hard to be good. They may be concerned about a parent's distress, or worry that if they misbehave the parent who has care of them will leave them too. Sometimes children become protective of one parent and blame and reject the other. Children from the same family may respond differently. Their feelings and reactions are likely to become more complicated when one or both parents start a new relationship.



How parents and carers can help

Children are affected by the ways their parents respond to the separation. Getting support for yourself to help you manage the stress of separation is very important. If you are coping, it helps your children to manage the changes better. If there is ongoing conflict and hostility between parents, it makes it much more difficult for children. When this occurs, children's wellbeing suffers and they are more likely to experience emotional or behavioural problems.

Helping children cope

- Reassure children that even though you will no longer live all together as a family, they will not lose your love and care. Offer this kind of reassurance often and back it up with action.
- Explain what is happening as it relates to the child (eg where they will be living, how they will get to school). Let them know clearly what and how things will change, and what will stay the same.
- Try to maintain children's normal routines as far as possible. This helps children feel safer.
- Understand that children find it hard, and acknowledge and encourage them when they are coping well.
- Provide extra support before and after contact visits to help children settle.
- Recognise that it is likely to be difficult for children when you start a new relationship. Counselling can help you learn ways to make this transition easier for children and for yourselves.

Helping children maintain relationships

- Respect children's need to continue their relationship with the other parent (unless it is unsafe), as well as with extended family such as grandparents, and support them to do so.
- Try to ensure that visits to the other parent are regular and predictable.
- Help children to see the positives (eg two homes, adults not fighting) and to look forward to spending time with the other parent.
- Avoid criticising the other parent to your children. Sort out issues with the other parent rather than involving the children in your disputes. Seek mediation if conflict persists.

Managing your own stress

- Strong feelings and mood swings are part of a normal reaction when you separate.
- Allow time to come to terms with feelings of loss and grief.
- Don't be surprised if the demands of parenting seem much more difficult when you are under stress. Make allowances for yourself and develop strategies to help you cope.
- Look for support from family and friends. Professional counselling support can be especially helpful for dealing with difficult feelings and finding ways to cope better.



This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Primary information sheets for families and school staff. View them all online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au



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