

Ask the Experts

Ten Tips for Parents About Children and Separation



Adapted from work by Jennifer McIntosh, Ph.D., North Carlton, Victoria, Australia

1. Parents have a large influence on children's separation outcomes

To a great extent, your child's outcomes after separation are in your hands. That's the good news, and the challenging news as well. The way you go about your life will make a difference to your children's ability to cope with the family separation, as well as their long term well-being.

2. Warmth, availability and emotional safety

It's important during and following separation for parents to be available and responsive to their children. That means warm, real time parenting, not good time over-compensating. Let your children know you are willing to hear about all of their feelings - not just the ones that feel good or seem fair.

3. Doing the emotional work

Being available to your children means clearing a space in your own mind for thinking clearly about them. Sadness, anger or confusion are normal and necessary emotions for children as well as parents after divorce. Adjustment and working it through is what matters.

4. Keeping it predictable

Just like before separation, infants and children need the same predictability, routines, practical and emotional support from Mum and Dad. They need parents to stay attuned and be responsive to their needs. Make sure your parenting arrangements enable this to happen.



5. Cleaning up the conflict

Parents may take a while to sort through the conflict that came with the separation. Get all the support you need to sort it through, as early as possible attend a Mediation Service as needed. While you are in the thick of parenting decisions and settlements, your children shouldn't be. Reassure them you are working to resolve things.

6. Separating your spouse, not your child's other parent

Building a parenting alliance with your ex partner is crucial to your child's emotional security after separation. That doesn't mean being best friends, but it does mean agreeing on how to communicate safely and effectively about your child's needs. Enlist the support of a good mediator if that is hard to achieve on your own.

7. Don't drag it out

The longer parents' take to build an alliance and resolve their disputes, the more energy a child has to use to cope with strain and stress in the family. That can drain a child of energy. They need to get on with their normal development: learning, building their identity and esteem, having good friendships, and achieving their goals.

8. Legal advice versus legal action

Many parents benefit from the advice of lawyers, to inform them about their rights and responsibilities in making parenting plans and resolving financial settlements. Be aware that getting legal advice is very different from taking legal action. Court processes are necessary for a small percent of the population who have serious risks and issues that cannot be resolved otherwise. Research shows that engaging in court can do further and long term damage to your relationship with the child's other parent. Take good legal advice, but try to minimize the need for legal action.



9. Letting your children have a safe voice

Research also shows it can be beneficial for everyone if children are given safe opportunities, free from loyalty burdens, to express how things are for them, and for their parents to better understand that. This is very different from asking children to make decisions — never a good idea. Some court and mediation programs have specially trained social science professionals who can assist with safely including children's views in your planning for post divorce life.

10. Permission and support for safe relationships with both parents

Despite the acrimony that many parents feel for each other during the divorce process, most children want to keep their relationships with each parent and need support to do that. Loyalty conflicts are common when children see and feel a lack of respect and

co-operation between their parents. Worse still is the child who survives emotionally by distancing one parent in order to keep sides with the other. Effective management of the adult emotions involved means everything for children's well-being, especially their need to preserve supportive relationships with both parents.



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