

Emotional Transitions for Children of Separating Parents

Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1989) identified 6 critical tasks that children need to perform in order to affect this transition in a healthy way and adjust to their parents' separation.

- **They must acknowledge the reality that their parents have separated.** This is, of course, a huge task. Many children pretend it is not happening and resist any attempts by their parents or siblings to talk about it.
- **They must disengage from parental conflict.** If children are made aware of every aspect of the parents' disputes then this task can become very difficult. Children need to be allowed to regain their childhood, to continue with their own lives, at pre-school and with friends.
- **Children must grieve** for the losses that result from their parents' separation.
- **Children must also work through their anger**, and accept that they are not to blame for the separation. It is easy for them to feel responsible. Some children may feel that if they had behaved better their parents would not have separated. Some may instinctively or unconsciously believe that if they behave badly the parents might get back together to sort things out.
- **Children need to accept that the separation is permanent.** Some children go on hoping for a reconciliation for many years, often even after one parent has remarried.
- **Finally, children need to achieve a realistic hope about their own future relationships.** The experience of their parents' separation can leave children feeling insecure and fearful that any relationship they have with their resident parent, with friends will not last. They need to learn somehow that not all relationships end and that relationships can endure through separation and time.