

How can I help my children to cope with the separation?

You children will be affected by your separation. The way in which you behave with your ex-partner, the amount of reassurance you give your children, and how you behave in front of the children will either increase or reduce their stress. Ensure conversations are appropriate to their age and emotional development.

How will your children react and how can you help?

No two children will necessarily react in the same way, but all will have underlying worries and thoughts that you need to be aware of, and to help them to handle.

Guilt

Reassure your child that they are in no way to blame or responsible for the situation. Regardless of their age, perhaps the best way to let them know about the divorce is to say "Mummy and Daddy have decided not to be together and will be happier living apart." If both of you can tell your children together, this will help.

Insecurity

Your children need to be reassured as to what will happen to them, where they will live, and that they won't "lose" one of their parents. Most importantly, they need to be reassured that both parents unconditionally love them.

When younger children see their parents separate, they may believe or fear that their parents' love for them is also conditional and uncertain. Reassure your children that both parents love them and will always be there for them.

Change

Change brings about insecurity. Keep to established routines. If the children are used to seeing grandparents at a certain time, keep to this. If they have set activities, ensure they are maintained.

With regard to contact, establish new routines as quickly as you can. Speak with your ex-partner and keep to the same bedtime routines, rules, methods of discipline, and ensure you work collaboratively in their upbringing. Don't try to outbid each other with treats and toys since your children need consistency, and most importantly, your time, security and love. Expensive toys are a poor substitute.

It is also understandable, especially as the contact parent, to relax boundaries (such as disciplining your children for bad behaviour) since you don't want to risk your children being upset when they come to see you. Boundaries help children to feel secure and you can reduce your worry by strengthening the relationship with your children.

Confusion

Why is this happening? Give your children plenty of opportunities to ask questions, and

limit your answers to give them enough to let them know what is going to happen, but not enough to disturb them. They don't need to know the details of the Court case, and hearing negative comments about their other parent will cause them distress. Keep feelings of anger and blame out of discussions. Let your child know that they can talk to you about how they feel at any time.

Sadness and Anger

Validate their feelings. "I know how sad/angry this has made you feel" and reassure them. "It will take a little time for all of us to get used to the change, but we both love you, and will always be there for you". Encourage them to talk about their feelings, and most importantly, listen to them.

Ask what would help them. It may be a phone call to their absent parent or knowing what is going to happen. You won't know unless you ask, and the very fact of being asked will help. Be as honest as you can about what will happen.

If there is a new partner in your life, you may face resentment since displaying affection for your new girlfriend or boyfriend can make your children feel disloyal or jealous. Accept that it will take time to adjust to a new situation. Ensure you spend time with them on your own and encourage them to talk about how they feel, and also talk about how you feel. Keep the conversation appropriate to their age and do not be disparage their other parent.

How can I strengthen my relationship with my children?

You strengthen your relationship by spending quality time together, when you can both relax and have fun. Find activities you both enjoy. For younger children, this could be going swimming, bowling, reading stories, taking them to activities and staying involved, playing games together, or going to watch them take part in activities (depending on their age).

Regardless of age, show an interest in what interests them. If you don't know, then now is the best time to ask.

Mix with friends and family who also have children, so there is an extended network of friends for them to play with and talk to when they are with you.

Keep your promises. If you say you will be there to pick them up at a certain time, or will take them out for the weekend, don't let them down. If you're not sure whether you'll be able to do something, don't promise it.

Keeping to age-appropriate rules and boundaries helps a child to feel secure and helps them prepare for life. Judge the times when those rules need to be relaxed a little, but if your children's behaviour slips, consider your own actions, and whether more attention needs to be paid to reassuring them by showing your love, interest, approval, and praise.

What warning signs of stress should I look out for and what should I do?

With toddlers and preschool children, watch for regressive behaviour such as thumb-sucking, bed-wetting and restless nights. They may become more sensitive, have tantrums, and engage in power struggles. Keep boundaries in place, but ensure they have your attention and reassurance.

With children of school age it is worthwhile letting the school know about the situation at home. If problems arise at school with the children's work or behaviour, then the school should be more sympathetic and can work with you to support your child rather than simply punishing them.

With teenagers, they may become more argumentative or withdrawn and you may notice other marked changes in their behaviour and attitude. Crisis situations could include running away, alcohol or drug problems, eating disorders, self-harm or depression. Don't be afraid to ask for outside help.

Don't expect your children to adjust to the change overnight and give them time to heal. If you notice them emotionally supporting you through this change, think very carefully whether you should be seeking support from elsewhere. It isn't healthy for children to take on the role of parent and comforter.

If you become worried about the levels of stress your child is showing, then consider talking to your GP or a counsellor. Discuss your

concerns with your ex-partner and work with them. If you can, encourage another member of your family such as your own siblings or parents or an adult family friend to let your child know they can talk to them. Choose someone who understands that blaming your ex-partner won't help the children.

Should I treat a teenager differently to a younger child?

Yes. Involve them in decisions about contact. This means you should include them in decisions about holidays and changing arrangements, but not necessarily agree to whatever they say.

What can I do if my children won't talk to me?

If they won't talk to you about their feelings, and you are worried about how they are coping, consider giving them the telephone number of Childline.

0800 1111

Reassure your children that you are always there to talk to them, but if they feel unable to confide in you, they can speak to someone at Childline and that what they say will be treated in confidence. It is better that they talk to a trained counsellor than bottle up their feelings.

Whatever your children's age, you can talk to your GP if you have concerns.

Family Lives is an excellent organisation that

provides support to parents and I would recommend contacting them if you need to.

<http://familylives.org.uk/>

What shouldn't I do?

No matter the provocation, don't ever fight or argue with your ex-partner in front of your children. They learn from watching their parents, and in addition to the emotional harm caused by witnessing your arguments, it can cause problems that persist through to adulthood. Remember, the definition of harm to children within Family Law includes the impairment of a child's development resulting from seeing or hearing the ill treatment of another person

Children adjust most quickly to parental separation when their parents work collaboratively in their upbringing, and remain civil. Research confirms that children fare best on all adjustment measures when subject to shared care arrangements.