

Children and separation.

Relationship breakdown can be one of the most difficult periods in a person's life.

It is often a period characterised by high levels of conflict, confusion, sadness and anger. For some couples these emotions can continue on for some time, while for others, mutual acceptance that the relationship has ended occurs very quickly and the healing process commences soon after the relationship has ended.

Sadly it is often our children who are most impacted by the ending of a relationship.

Children react to separation in different ways. The way your children will react depends on many factors including:

- Family relationships before separation
- Your children's ages and personalities
- How both parents manage the situation

This tip sheet is designed to help separating couples minimise the impact the relationship breakdown might have upon their children.

While you may cease to be a partner, you never cease to be a parent.

Separating couples can often be characterised in the following ways -

Combative couples

These relationships are characterised by high conflict. Parents tend to focus on the wrong doings of their partner, and rarely talk except in anger. They do not want to see each other and avoid contact as much as possible. They often need a third party (lawyer, mediator, child) to settle disagreements.

These relationships can often result in children feeling abandoned or compelled to choose sides, resulting in the loss of a parent.

Business partners (Cooperative parenting)

These relationships are characterised by partners that continue to make joint decisions about their children. These couples keep areas of conflict separate from their interactions with their children. An example of a cooperative parenting agreement might be the capacity to work out living arrangements that work for everyone.

This parental relationship has the capacity to minimise adverse emotional effects on the children and allows the children to have their own individual relationships with each parent.

Many couples will float between both of these characterisations

Common responses from kids when parents separate

Divorce can make children feel powerless and insecure. Kids go through a grieving process when their parents break-up that often demonstrates itself in different ways to adults. Children will often feel –

- Angry and sad about the loss of the family unit
- Abandoned or rejected by the parent that leaves
- Confused about whether it is alright to love the parent who no longer lives with them
- Guilty, as though somehow the separation must be their fault
- Worried about the parent who is not living with them
- Some children may regress in their development – return to bedwetting, use baby talk or act out aggressively and anti-socially

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What parents can do to minimise the impact on their kids

- Avoid arguing in front of your children
 - Try and make supportive comments of your child's ongoing relationship with the other parent when talking to your children
 - Continue to communicate with the other parent about your child's needs and interests
 - Avoid asking your children to give messages to the other parent
 - Turn to other adults for emotional support rather than your children
 - Reassure your children that they are not to blame for the separation
 - Ensure that your children know you both still love them
- Encourage your children to talk about the separation – keeping secrets can be very difficult on children
 - Consider advising your child's school about what is happening – notify the principal, school counsellor or teachers

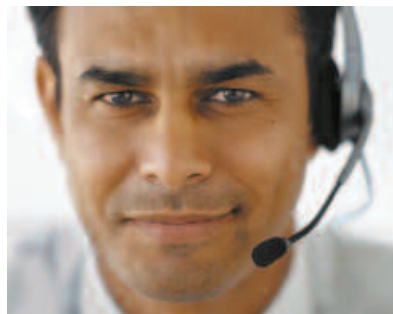
Questions that might be on the kids lips

- Who is responsible for me?
- Will I have to change schools?
- Can I still see my friends?
- Will I still visit my Grandparents, cousins, aunties and uncles?
- What will happen to my pets?
- How can I tell my friends what's happening?
- If I am separated from my brothers and sisters, will we still see each other?

Try and discuss these questions with your children, it might help you to see things from their perspective and provide some focus for you in dealing with the end of your relationship. If you have ongoing concerns about talking to your children or your own feelings at this time it is important that you seek some independent advice or help.

Mensline Australia can assist with this – 1300 78 99 78.

This tip sheet was adapted from the work of Lilia Szarski BA M ED (psych) Monash Reg Psych Vic./McIntosh J. Because it's for the kids – building a secure base after separation, Bamba Press, Melb./Family Court resources, www.familycourt.gov.au



The only service of its kind, Mensline Australia provides confidential telephone counselling, information and referral to specifically enable men to enhance their relationships and manage the challenges associated with disruptions to their family life or primary relationships.

Managed through Crisis Support Services Inc, Mensline Australia is a national service available 24 hours a day, seven days a week for the cost of a local call.

Mensline Australia was established in September 2001 as part of the Commonwealth Government's Men and Family Relationships initiative. Since then, the service has been overwhelmed by calls from men around the country wanting to talk about their relationships.

1300 78 99 78
www.menslineaus.org.au

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Mensline Australia
is managed by Crisis Support Services