

children and separation

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

It is often a time when you may experience confusion, sadness and anger with high levels of conflict.

For some, these emotions can continue for a period of time, while for others, an acceptance that the relationship has ended occurs very quickly and the healing process commences.

Sadly, our children can be the ones most impacted by the end 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

These tips are designed to help separating couples to minimise any impact on their children. While you may cease to be a partner, you never cease to be a parent.

Common responses from kids when parents separate

Children feel powerless and insecure. The grieving process children go through when their parents separate is often quite different to adults. They may 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 – e.g. return to bedwetting, begin to use baby talk, act out aggressively or antisocially.

Questions that might be on their minds

- Who is responsible for me?
- Will I have to change schools?
- Can I still see my friends?
- Will I still visit my grandparents/ extended family?
- 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 to 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.

For more information and tools to help your children during this time, contact MensLine Australia on 1300 78 99 78.

This tip sheet is part of a series of self-help tools for men. More tools can be found at www.mensline.org.au. For more information and assistance, call MensLine Australia on 1300 78 99 78.

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Separating couples can be characterised in the following ways:

Combative couples

Characterised by high conflict, these parents tend to focus on the wrongdoings 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 or child) to settle disagreements.

These relationships can often result in children feeling abandoned, compelled to choose sides, or be the mediator.

Business partners (Cooperative parenting)

Characterised by partners that are able to make joint decisions about their children, these partners keep any conflict separate from their interactions with their children. This parental relationship is designed to minimise adverse emotional effects on children while allowing them to have their own individual relationship with each parent.

Many couples will float between both of these characterisations. Additionally, one parent may be attempting to be cooperative whilst the other is combative. If you find yourself in a situation where the other person is not working with you around the children, try to not let this impact on your children.

What parents can do to minimise the impact on their kids

- Avoid arguing in front of your children
- Don't criticise the other parent in front of your children
- Try to 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 that you and their other parent still love them
- Encourage your children to talk about the separation – secrets can be very tough on children
- Consider advising your child's school about what is happening – notify the principal, school counsellor or teachers.



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