

Helping children to adjust

Research has shown that the factors that can be most detrimental to children are:

- losing a relationship with one of their parents
- being exposed to ongoing parental conflict
- ineffective parental boundaries
- feeling pressured to take sides and choose between their parents
- being drawn in to an adult role and expected to meet their parents' emotional needs

Children develop a sense of themselves from the messages they receive from the world around them. These messages are reinforced by the relationship between their parents and the availability of both parents throughout their development. If a parent's availability is interrupted or parents are in open conflict and demonstrating a lack of respect for each other, it makes it more difficult for children to identify positively with each parent and complete their psychological development.

Things that help...

- **Explain the situation**

Children need to know what is happening in age appropriate language. You should be straightforward and to the point but avoid simply saying that mum and dad no longer love each other as this can lead younger children to believe that the day may come when their parents no longer love them. You can use toys or pictures to help explain the changes to younger children.

- **Establish new routines**

Separation inevitably brings disruption. In the early days, you should avoid unnecessary changes. However, new routines should be established as soon as possible. Children need to know where they will be and when they will be there. Secure boundaries will help to keep children feeling secure. Picture charts can be used to help younger children understand.

- **Listen to your child's experiences**

It's vital that parents pay attention to their children's experiences. Children are very adept at hiding their true feelings in order not to create more upset than their already is. You should gently offer your child the chance to describe their feelings about the separation - even though it may be difficult for you to listen to. Acknowledging children's feelings will help them come to terms with changes and allowing them to cry will help in the healing process.

- **Offer reassurance**

Children need reassurance that both of their parents still love them and care about them. They need to know that they were not responsible for their parents' separation and that they can't bring their mum and dad back together.

- **Demonstrate co-operation**

Children must be free to have meaningful, relaxed and flexible relationships with both of their parents. Different post separation parenting arrangements will be more suitable in different situations but these should be based around children's changing needs over time. You should try to establish good levels of communication and support each other's parenting input.

- **Avoid conflict**

However difficult the ending of a relationship has been, it is important that disputes are kept to a minimum and that any conflict is resolved away from your children. You do not need to remain friends after the separation but you should aim to build a respectful business-like relationship that puts the needs of your children first.