



Divorce and separation

Family separation and divorce can be very stressful for the children, young people and families, with people placed under varying degrees of stress.

How might children and young people react?

Each child or young person will respond differently to a family break up, depending on many factors such as their personality, coping style, relationship with family members, how their family is coping and the messages they receive about the separation. Children and young people from the same family may also respond differently.

Look out for changes in their normal behaviours as a guide to understanding how individuals are coping and if they need additional support.

Children

Sometimes children talk about how they are feeling, but more often it comes out in their behaviour.

Changes you might notice include:

- increased anxiety – for example, wanting to stay close to their families.
- increased anger or conflict with others.
- trying really hard to be good – for example a child may be concerned about a family member's distress, or worry that if they misbehave, the

family member who has primary care of them will leave them too.

- protectiveness toward one parent – blaming and rejecting the other.

These are common reactions to the sense of loss and powerlessness that most children feel in these circumstances. Their feelings and reactions are likely to become more complicated when one or both parents start a new relationship.

Young People

During adolescence, young people are going through a lot of social, emotional and physical changes.

Separation and divorce can complicate these normal ups and downs. It can be hard to know whether difficult behavior is normal teenager behavior or whether it's a sign a young person is struggling with the separation. It could be a combination of both.

Like children, young people may not be able to express in words their experiences or worries.

Some signs that they may need extra support include:

- behavior, mood or personality changes (for instance, getting angry, upset or tearful more than usual.)
- not wanting to be around family members
- problems with their schoolwork
- problems with sleep (reported to you or observed through excessive tiredness in class)
- eating problems like binge eating or loss of appetite
- losing interest in activities they usually enjoy
- having problems with friends or peer groups
- taking risks like challenging school rules, shoplifting, graffiti, taking drugs or binge drinking

Children and young people whose parents are separated or divorced will all react to and experience this event differently.

However, it's helpful to keep in mind that:

- if children and young people are regularly moving between two households, this may be associated with practical and emotional difficulties.
- if young people are living in single-parent families, they may have additional household responsibilities.
- family transitions (for example, becoming a blended family) following divorce may be as important as the divorce in terms of their impact.
- children and young people manage the changes associated with separation better when their family is coping.
- rigid arrangements and a high level of conflict between family members may compromise the wellbeing of children and young people, which can then impact upon their learning.

What can you do to help?

As an educator, you can support children and young people by:

- seeking information from families on their new routine, so you can support children and young people with accurate information when they're in your care.
- acknowledging the child or young person's feelings about their parents' separation – for

example, if a child expresses sadness that they haven't seen a parent for a few days, you could acknowledge how hard this is and how it makes them feel.

- observing any changes in their behaviour, coping or emotions, and communicating with the family about these changes.
- being aware that separation can be a risk factor for mental health issues, and if changes or concerns persist, seek support from senior staff or wellbeing staff.
- encouraging talking with a trusted adult about how they're feeling.
- referring them to wellbeing staff if you think they could benefit from extra support.
- acknowledging that it's a difficult time for the family.
- being understanding of the difficulties that could arise from moving between two houses (for example, school books being left at the other house)
- encouraging communication with their family about the changes and any problems.

You can support families by:

- understanding that the parents themselves will also be experiencing strong emotions, distress, or stress, and that this can make the demands of parenting harder
- sharing information and observations about the children and young people in your care and how they're coping with the changes
- reassuring families that distress is a normal grief response in children and young people to separation, but that most recover without long-term negative effects
- sensitively directing parents or families to appropriate supports to help them cope with the changes in their family and the additional demands of parenting, if required.

Tips for families

Children and young people benefit when families:

- reassure them often that they'll not lose the love and care of either parent, and back this up with action
- explain what's happening as it relates to them (for example, where they'll be living, how they'll get to school), and let them know clearly what things will change and how, and what will stay the same
- try to maintain normal routines as far as possible, as this helps children and young people feel safer
- understand and acknowledge that children and young people find it hard, and may react differently to other children in the family
- provide extra support before and after contact visits to help children and young people settle
- recognise that it's likely to be difficult for children and young people when either parent starts a new relationship
- get support for themselves to help them manage the stress of separation
- recognise that if there's ongoing conflict and hostility between family members, it's much harder for children and young people – their wellbeing suffers and they're more likely to experience emotional or behavioural problems.
- respect their need to continue their relationship with the other parent (unless it's unsafe), as well as with extended family such as grandparents, and support them to do so
- try to ensure that visits to the other parent are regular and predictable
- avoid criticising the other parent to children and young people – conflict with the other parent should be addressed directly with them, and should not involve the child
- allow older adolescents a more active role in the decision-making about their living arrangements.

Be You Professional Learning

Learn more about observing children and young people's behavioural and mood changes; inquiring sensitively about your concerns; and providing support for children, young people and their families, in the [Early Support](#) domain.

References

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- McIntosh, J., Burke, S., Dour, N., & Gridley, H. (2009). Parenting after separation: A position statement prepared for the Australian Psychological Society. Melbourne: Australian Psychological Society.