

How to speak with separating parents about their children's wellbeing

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Key messages

- Separation and divorce are often associated with high levels of stress in the family. The impact on children's wellbeing depends on the level of conflict between parents, the consequences of a parent's absence, and the quality of the child-parent relationship.
- Separation can increase the risk of family violence. Experiencing family violence is often traumatic and long-lasting for children.
- Practitioners who are not trained in family dispute resolution or counselling – including GPs, social workers, allied health professionals and teachers – often have contact with parents during separation. It is important that these practitioners ask about parents' and children's wellbeing and make referrals to specialised services as necessary.
- Questions about children's wellbeing need to come from a place of inquiry, practising compassion and non-judgement.
- In cases of family violence, practitioners may need to make extra effort to support struggling families by arranging appointments, making calls, and providing application forms and other information. Referrals to ongoing, long-term support and regular follow-ups with the family can support children's wellbeing.

What is this resource about?

This resource outlines the importance of making children's wellbeing a central aspect of the conversations practitioners have with parents who are going through separation or divorce.

Professionals including general practitioners (GPs), social workers and allied health workers are sometimes unsure about how to best support children's wellbeing when working with parents who are separating or separated. They may not know how to incorporate this into their roles, or how to have such conversations in a way that is sensitive and respectful.

This resource aims to address this gap by summarising the latest research and best-practice principles on parenting during separation; sharing personal experiences from parents who have engaged with a range of practitioners during separation; and outlining practice ideas on what practitioners who are not specialised in family dispute resolution or counselling can do when speaking with separating families. It guides practitioners through different conversation scenarios, ranging from making simple inquiries about daily life to discussing more difficult issues like family violence.

The key message is that unless it is likely to cause harm, it is always important to ask parents, respectfully and without judgement, about their children's wellbeing and make referrals to specialised services as necessary.

Who is this resource for?

This resource is for practitioners from diverse health, social and community roles who come into contact with parents and children during separation and divorce. The practice ideas captured in this resource are introductory and best suited for professionals who have not undergone extensive training in counselling and/or family dispute resolution and mediation.

This resource is not intended to replace professional training on supporting separating families, families with complex needs or separating parents where there are concerns of family violence, child abuse or neglect. Practitioners should consider the advice in this resource within the scope of their own practice, including their level of experience, training and capacity.

When a family's circumstances require a more specialised approach, referrals to appropriately qualified professionals or services need to be offered, and families should be encouraged to seek support (e.g. specialised family violence services; [mandatory reporting of child abuse and neglect requirements](#)).

How was this resource developed?

This is the second in a series of resources focused on helping separating parents understand and support the social and emotional wellbeing of their children. The first resource, [Working with separating parents to support children's wellbeing: What can we learn from evidence-based programs?](#) describes common elements of evidence-based parenting programs and discusses how individual practitioners can use these elements in their one-on-one work with separating parents, promoting children's wellbeing.

This resource was developed using a consultation process, which included:

- 24 professionals from diverse health and community roles, who helped to identify the issue and provided input on what they needed to know in relation to speaking to separating parents
- four parents with lived experience of family separation and of accessing different professional services while separating; and
- three senior professionals working in the family dispute resolution and counselling area, who provided practical guidance on how to engage with parents and children during separation.

Each section in the resource includes a synthesis of key research findings, describes experiences shared by the parents and practitioners who were consulted, and provides practice ideas. A case study called 'Anne's story' is used throughout the resource to bring to life the discussed issues by sharing the experience of a separated parent. Some sections begin with quotes to further illustrate the issues in the words of practitioners and parents.

Incorporating the voices of parents with lived experience

- To bring the voices of real people to life, four parents were consulted when developing this resource. They were asked about their interactions with a range of practitioners during separation and what they found helpful and unhelpful in relation to discussing their children's wellbeing.
- By including real stories in the resource, the authors are able to bring the findings of research to life and show what separation looks like for some Australian families.
- The parents who shared their stories felt that they were participating to help make someone else's struggle easier.
- Real-life scenarios make it easier for practitioners to remember and apply the findings of research.



Definitions

For the purpose of this resource:

- **‘Children’** refers specifically to children and young people aged from birth to 12 years of age, although some information may be relevant to children up to the age of 18 years.
- **‘Family dispute resolution’** refers to a mediation process in which an independent family dispute resolution practitioner helps separating families come to their own agreements regarding separation-related issues, including parenting agreements.
- **‘Family and domestic violence’** includes physical and sexual violence, and psychological, emotional, financial and other forms of abusive control and coercion.
- **‘Parent’** refers to a child’s biological or adoptive mother and father, the spouse or domestic partner of a child’s mother or father, or any person with parental responsibility for a child. Unless citing specific research findings, in this resource the term is used as an umbrella for a child’s primary caregivers. Most of the practice ideas and information provided also apply to non-parental primary caregivers.
- **‘Practitioners’** are professionals working in health and welfare services, including frontline service providers and managers.

- **‘Separated’** refers to parental separation or divorce. It applies to parents who are/were married or in de facto relationships.
- **‘Separating’** refers both to parents who are currently undergoing separation, as well as those who have already separated but are still managing the consequences of separation.
- **‘Social, emotional and behavioural wellbeing’** refers to a child’s capacity to form secure relationships, experience and regulate emotions, and explore and learn. These indicators of wellbeing are measured against generally accepted norms and functioning of children within the context of their age, family and cultural background (Georgetown University, n.d.).
- **‘Wellbeing’** refers to social and emotional wellbeing, which includes mental health as well as social, behavioural and emotional development.

Anne’s story

Anne¹ and her husband were living with their two children when she first started seeking help to separate from him. The relationship was full of conflict, and Anne and the children were victims of family violence.

Anne interacted with a range of professionals during this difficult period, including the police, a counsellor, hospital staff, community organisations and her local GP. Very few knew how to help her and even fewer asked about the wellbeing of her children.

When she sought support from a local community organisation to leave her husband, the individuals she interacted with convinced her to stay, fearing that her husband would be lost without her. Anne felt confused and uncertain. She didn’t know what to do when they suggested that she puts the needs of her husband first, even though she told them she wanted to separate from him.

Her daughter’s mental health was suffering, but despite interacting with a range of professionals, it wasn’t until one year after starting to seek help to separate from her husband, when Anne and her children reached a homeless refuge, that she got the help she needed. Anne calls this ‘a failure in our system’.

¹ All names and other personal details reported in this resource have been changed to protect the individual’s identity.

Introduction

Divorce and family separation (hereafter 'separation') are common in many Western countries (Oren, 2020). In Australia, data from 2019 show a crude divorce rate of 1.9 divorces per 1,000 Australian residents. It is possible that the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and possible recession may see this rate increase in the near future (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020).

In 2017, 47% of divorces in Australia involved children under the age of 18 (AIFS, 2021). Research has demonstrated that most of the negative consequences of separation for children are not due to the separation itself but due to the factors that can accompany separation, such as parental acrimony and conflict (Amato, 2010).

A common and effective way to safeguard children's wellbeing through separation is to support parents in the process (Schramm & Becher, 2020). However, to promote a smooth family transition, it is important that, while providing support to parents, children's wellbeing is kept in focus, and their voices and needs are brought into the conversation.

Supporting parents through separation

Parents going through separation can experience emotional, social and financial difficulties, which impact on their own health and wellbeing and that of their children. They can be overwhelmed with high levels of distress, grief and loss, and may be less attuned to social and behavioural wellbeing cues from their children (Clarke, 2013). They may also be involved in inter-parental conflict, which can change their sleep patterns, appetite and lifestyle, and decrease their general health (D'Onofrio, 2011; Clark, 2013).

In Australia, inter-parental conflict has been observed in 40% of separated families with children aged 12–13 years, compared to only 10% in similar families that were not separated (Kaspiew et al., 2017). One in four mothers and one in six fathers have been shown to experience physical harm before separation, and approximately 50% of fathers and 60% of mothers experienced emotional abuse before or during separation (Kaspiew et al., 2017).

The changes in parents' own wellbeing can also impact on their relationship with their children, as they may have reduced capacity for emotional regulation, efficacy, consistency and/or warmth, and may experience increased irritability. This in turn may lead to children having poorer physical health, socio-emotional adjustment, and academic achievement (D'Onofrio, 2011; Clark, 2013).

In Australia, many separating families do not seek the support of specialist family dispute resolution or counselling services, and instead navigate separation on their own. The Experiences of Separated Parents Study (ESPS) found that almost 70% of separating parents established parenting arrangements without any professional assistance, agreeing on co-parenting through discussion between themselves (Kaspiew et al., 2015). It is important that a range of practitioners who come into contact with families during separation, including those who are not specialists in the subject matter, support parents and bring the needs of children into focus.

The level of distress parents experience is likely to be influenced not only by their personal relationship with the other parent, but also by structural issues, such as their socio-economic status, and cultural and ethnic background (Terhaag, Fitzsimons, Daraganova, & Patalay, 2021). For example, parents from cultural minority groups in Australia, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents, are more likely to experience emotional stress; children whose parents are unemployed have significantly higher emotional symptoms than children whose parents are employed (Terhaag et al., 2021).

While untangling differences by culture, sexual orientation and socio-economic status of separating families is beyond the scope of this resource, it is important to be non-judgemental, keep in mind that some groups and communities may experience additional difficulties, and not make assumptions about anyone's circumstances. Asking genuine, open-ended questions is a good first step to encouraging parents to outline their situation from their own perspective. Referrals to interpreters, services specialising in supporting Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander communities, and other culturally sensitive professionals may be appropriate in some circumstances. Many of the national family relationship organisations in Australia are set up to assist with family matters in a range of communities.

The principles shared in this resource on supporting parents and focusing on children's wellbeing are applicable to all separating families, but the way they are communicated will need to remain flexible to meet the needs of a particular family.



Parent and practitioner experiences

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‘How are the children? Are the children safe? Who are the children with?’ These are the questions that I got asked [by the GP]. They were helpful, because they weren’t just looking after me. They were reassuring me that if my children were safe that it’s easier for me to recover as quick as possible.

SEPARATED FATHER OF TWO CHILDREN

Professionals who work outside of the family dispute resolution and counselling area can sometimes be the first or only impartial people that separating parents see during this difficult period. Parents commonly seek assistance from teachers, general practitioners, domestic violence support workers and allied health workers, such as social workers and psychologists (Kaspiew et al., 2015; Mahony, Walsh, Lunn, & Petriwskyj, 2015).

It is important that practitioners use these opportunities to find out how parents and their children can be supported and offer appropriate referrals where required. Conversations with parents need to be respectful and sensitive to their potentially vulnerable circumstances, but also courageous enough to bring the children’s needs into focus.

Some of the parents consulted when developing this resource reported that they did not seek help from anyone during the most stressful period of their separation, for fear of being judged. Others said some of the practitioners they interacted with downplayed the magnitude of their family struggles, missing opportunities to support the parent’s and children’s wellbeing. Some had a more positive experience and received helpful support and reassurance from a practitioner.



What can practitioners do to support parents?

When engaging with parents experiencing distress, it is important to acknowledge their feelings and the difficulties they are facing, provide appropriate support, and make non-judgemental inquiries about their children’s wellbeing. Practitioners can:

- focus on discussing the parents’ wellbeing and providing them with support, before incorporating questions about the child–parent relationship
- listen to the parents’ experience and help them understand that the feelings of grief, loss and distress they are experiencing are normal, as separation can be one of the most stressful events in life
- clearly communicate that parents need to look after their own health and engage in self-care to have the emotional capacity to engage in positive parenting practices; and
- suggest to parents that children learn from modelled behaviour, and watching their parents practise self-care and demonstrate positive coping strategies is highly beneficial to the whole family (Clarke, 2013).

It is important for practitioners to ask open-ended questions and practise active listening by maintaining eye contact, nodding, using open body language, and reflecting back to the parent what you heard them say (McDonald, 2018). Questions can be about the family context, such as the parent’s relationship with the child, other significant relationships, the family and home environment, and values and beliefs around parenting (McDonald, 2018).

When distressed, parents may focus on content/narratives that are often emotionally charged and the co-parenting relationship can suffer. Practitioners can help parents refocus on the relational ‘process’ they are a part of, rather than ‘content’. A caveat to this approach is to keep an eye out for content stories that warrant attention, such as signs of abuse or neglect. Where such concerns arise, referrals to specialist services and/or mandatory reporting of child abuse and neglect may be necessary (see p. 11 for details).

Unless a practitioner is trained in teaching parenting techniques, it is best to be cautious about giving advice and problem solving for parents (Paterson, Price-Robertson, & Hervatin, 2021). It is important that practitioners remain within the remit of their professional role and expertise and are honest with parents about what they can and cannot do for them (McDonald, 2018). It is also respectful and helpful in facilitating the conversation if the practitioner acknowledges the parents’ expert knowledge of their child – it is rare that anyone knows a child better than their parents (McDonald, 2018).

Practice ideas for supporting parental wellbeing

Ask about the **parent's own wellbeing** first. Jumping straight into a conversation about the children might make the parent feel judged and defensive, but giving them space to talk about their own wellbeing sends the message that their experience is important too. Parents may feel more relaxed and open to discussing their children after an initial self-reflection. You can ask genuine, simple questions, such as:

- ‘How are you going with everything?’
- ‘What are you noticing about yourself since you made the decision to separate?’

Promote **self-care** and support parents to promote self-soothing in children, including:

- getting enough sleep
- eating well and exercising
- making friends and connecting with others
- being kind to themselves
- taking some time out; and
- seeking support for their mental health.

Use a **strengths-based** approach and acknowledge what the parent is doing well. For example, ‘*You are doing a great job looking after the children on your own.*’

Normalise the pain, grief and loss the parent might be feeling and let them know that it is OK. You can show empathy with statements like these:

- ‘*It's normal to lose sleep when your body and brain are under a lot of stress.*’
- ‘*It's important to understand that going through separation is a significant experience of grief and loss and can make it harder to be the parent we want to be.*’

Ask about the **support** available to the parent and **focus on solutions**, asking:

- ‘*Who is in your life that you can talk to about these things right now?*’
- ‘*Who supports you? How can you get more of this support?*’
- ‘*What do you think would be helpful for you now?*’

Share resources on self-care. For an example, see Better Health advice: [Self-care and support for parents and caregivers of young children](#)

Supporting children through separation

Article Nine of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) states that unless it is contrary to a child's wellbeing, children in situations of separation have the right to maintain a personal relationship and direct contact with both parents. Australia's Family Law Act, amended in 2006, reiterates this principle, stating that under normal circumstances a child has the right to maintain a meaningful relationship with both parents following separation (Moloney, 2014). ‘Normal circumstances’ are those where an ongoing relationship is not considered to put the child or another family member at risk. By maintaining a focus on the child's best interests, the negative impacts of separation can be mitigated and reduced (Moloney, 2014; Xerxa et al., 2020).

The impact of separation on children depends on a number of factors, including the level of conflict between their parents, the consequences of a parent's absence, family poverty (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Smyth, 2004), and the quality of child-parent relationships (Moloney, 2014; Xerxa et al., 2020). The process of separation takes time and a child's adjustment occurs in stages (D'Onofrio, 2011).

When learning about their parents' separation, many children experience emotions such as sadness, anger, fear of abandonment, confusion and guilt. They may also feel a sense of loss when one parent leaves the family home. However, the long-term and even short-term outcomes for children from separated families tend to vary across situations and depend on various individual and contextual factors that can reduce risk and promote resilience (Clark, 2013; Vélez, Wolchik, Tein, & Sandler, 2011).

While some earlier studies found that parental separation itself predicted difficulties in children's wellbeing (Amato, 2000; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Lansford et al., 2006), longitudinal studies show that children living in high-conflict families experienced an improvement in their wellbeing following separation (Amato, Kane, & James, 2011; Booth & Amato, 2001). Other studies have shown that where separation happened in families with low levels of conflict, the children were not likely to experience more behavioural difficulties than children from non-separated families (Xerxa et al., 2020).

These findings suggest that many of the negative consequences of separation for children are not due to the separation itself, but are related to the factors that can accompany it, such as parental acrimony and conflict (Amato, 2010; Schramm & Becher, 2020). Minimising children's exposure to conflict during separation is important for protecting their

wellbeing (Kelly & Emery, 2003). Practitioners can play an important role in finding out how children are coping and assisting parents to identify appropriate supports.

Many children and young people want their parents to listen more to their views about separation and parenting arrangements (Carson, Dunstan, Dunstan, & Roopani, 2018). Some children rely on support from their families, and some rely on their friends and peers during separation (Carson et al., 2018). By engaging in child-centred practice, practitioners can support parents to reflect on what the experience of separation has been like for children, and encourage open conversations to understand their needs.

Child-centred practice requires that the child is kept in focus throughout a given process and their perspective is always taken into account (UK Department of Health, 2000). It is founded on four core principles:

- **Timely** – recognising critical periods in childhood and adolescence and assisting children and young people as early as possible – early in the life of the child and early in the life of a problem.
- **Developmentally appropriate** – taking into account the developmental needs of children and young people in all decision-making.
- **Participatory** – providing children and young people with appropriate opportunities to participate in all aspects of the decisions that affect them.
- **Collaborative** – promoting a collaborative approach to the care and protection of children, including strengthening the networks that are critical to their wellbeing. (Adapted from Winkworth, 2006)

Interventions, such as parenting support programs, have shown positive results for children across a number of social, emotional, health and educational outcomes in different contexts (Jeong, Franchett, Ramos de Oliveira, Rehmani, & Yousafzai, 2021; McIntosh & Tan, 2017). A recent global review of parenting interventions for children under three years of age across 33 countries found that this type of support is beneficial, as it can improve early childhood cognitive, language, motor and socio-emotional development, and attachment patterns, and can reduce behavioural difficulties (Jeong et al., 2021).

For parents, these types of interventions improved parenting knowledge and practices, and parent-child interactions, but they did not reduce parental depressive symptoms. Interventions that covered

responsive caregiving had more positive effects on child cognitive development, parent-child interactions and other outcomes. Practitioners could recommend information about responsive parenting when referring parents to services.

Practitioners can also apply strategies from parenting programs to alleviate parental distress in individual practice (for details see Paterson et al., 2021). Providing information about the family dispute resolution process or research on what works to protect children's wellbeing can be useful for decreasing distress about parenting arrangements, children's adjustment to the situation and other outcomes.

Parent and practitioner experiences

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At no point when speaking about separation to any of my professionals [including GP, paediatrician, psychologist] did any of them ask about my children.

SEPARATED MOTHER OF THREE CHILDREN

When speaking to separating parents, it is important that practitioners use this opportunity to bring the children's needs into focus. Yet adults often omit children's voices from conversations, even if the topic is directly related to them. Parents reported that whether they were attending a medical appointment with their GP or a more elaborate family counselling group, even if the children were present, they were rarely addressed by the practitioners directly. It was more common for the practitioners to address the children 'through' their parent.

This lack of inclusion resulted in the children disengaging from the process and not wanting to return. The parents felt that if practitioners like GPs and allied health professionals asked about the children, it would help to keep the children's wellbeing at the fore when making decisions.

A mother of a child with a diagnosed mental illness said that her partner did not understand mental health and thought it did not apply to children. She said that if a GP had asked some questions about their child's wellbeing, her partner may have listened and acknowledged its importance. A father who at the time of separation was experiencing challenges with his mental health found it reassuring when his GP asked about his children and helped him talk through the plans he had for their safety and stability while he underwent therapy.

In Anne's story, earlier intervention by a proactive practitioner could have led to earlier identification of her child's mental health struggles and helped to support her psychological wellbeing.

Stigma and fear of being reported to child protection authorities can act as significant barriers to parents engaging in conversations about their children, especially where substance use is an issue (Harris, 2012; Kelleher, Cleary, & Jackson, 2012). Building rapport with the parent and being transparent about the boundaries of confidentiality are important steps towards supporting parents who may feel fear or mistrust towards professionals. For example, during consultations, a mother who had a difficult separation and a history of substance use issues disclosed that she felt very vulnerable at the time of separation and is not sure she could have handled having a GP ask about her children.

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At first, I didn't [seek help from any practitioners]. I was very fearful that I might be judged; that I might be referred to child protection teams. It was more the fear that people would judge that I wasn't fit to be a parent, a single parent on a government benefit payment. So, it took quite a long time – probably about two years – before I really started talking to anybody around separating.

SEPARATED MOTHER OF FOUR CHILDREN

The parents' experiences indicate that there are challenges and sensitivities associated with asking about a separating family's situation and that there is no 'one size fits all' approach. It is important that questions about children come from a place of inquiry and non-judgement. It may also help to establish trust if practitioners seek the parents' permission to ask them about the children before proceeding with the questions.

What can practitioners do to support parents and their children?

Practitioners can support and guide parents to identify risk factors (e.g. high stress), strengthen protective factors (e.g. positive parent-child relationship) and improve children's ability to navigate changes in family relations and circumstances (Clark, 2013). Practitioners who use a child-centred approach bring children's voices into the conversations with adults, even in circumstances when the issues that are being discussed are about

the separating couple. If necessary, a private session with the child can be arranged or, where identified as beneficial by practitioner and parent, a referral can be made for the child.

It is important to remember that children often see and understand more than adults realise, and not including them is not only a breach of their rights, but also a missed opportunity to connect and heal a family experiencing a difficult transition. A busy practitioner may not always have the time to discuss the details of a family's situation, but a child's wellbeing needs to be kept central. If there isn't enough time to talk with the parent immediately, another appointment can be made, and the parent can be reassured that their concerns are taken seriously.

Practice ideas for promoting child wellbeing

Once you have asked parents about how they are and given them a chance to talk about themselves, they will be more able to **focus on the needs of their children**. You can follow up with general questions about the children, such as:

- *'Tell me a bit about your children. How are they different? What stands out about each child?'*

Later, you can ask more specifically about children's experiences of the separation:

- *'How are your children dealing with the situation?'*
- *'What are the children noticing is happening here?', 'Have there been any signs that they are feeling the disruption between you?'*
- *'How well are they participating in their normal routines?'*
- *'What changes, if any, have you noticed in them?'*
 - *'Have you noticed any changes from what is normal; for example, sleeping less or bedwetting?'*
 - *'How is their behaviour and motivation to play?'*
 - *'How they are going at school, in their sport, etc.?'*
- *'What have the children told you about how they are feeling lately?'*

Encourage the parent to engage in **positive parenting** and be attuned to any cues from their children that indicate they might need support.

Refer parents to positive-parenting programs and other appropriate supportive community services, if that is likely to be of benefit to them.

Practice ideas for promoting child wellbeing (cont.)

Things to avoid

- All questions need to come from a place of inquiry, not **judgement**. Avoid asking questions that might come across as judgemental, such as:
 - ‘Are you sure that separation is the right thing to do?’
 - ‘Have you thought about what it’s going to be like for your kids to live in two separate homes?’
- Don’t **trivialise** the situation or pretend that the children are not affected by it. Avoid statements like ‘Don’t worry, your children won’t notice.’ Such statements do not encourage proactively supporting children through separation. Make it clear that separation can have a negative impact on children, but when supported by their parents, family and community, children are able to adapt with minimal stress. Focus on what can be done and what type of support the family needs to cope with the situation well.
- Avoid asking questions about a **new partner**, particularly in front of the children and especially if parents are distressed or seemingly unaware of any effects upon their children.

Providing information and referrals for separating parents

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Even if people aren’t willing to talk about it [child mental health] during the conversation, at least plant the seed in their mind; give them some literature on what to look for, on signs of attachment disorders and things like that that might be happening for the kids. They need some kind of education. There’s a lot of people out there who simply don’t know about it [child mental health].

SEPARATED MOTHER OF THREE CHILDREN

The provision of information on children’s development and how to support them during separation can be an important protective factor for children’s social and emotional wellbeing.

For example, in the Young Children in Divorce and Separation intervention, providing parents with standardised education materials about infant development and family disruption had a positive effect on a number of outcomes, including the

efficacy of the parenting plan and amount of distress experienced by the child (McIntosh & Tan, 2017).

The type of information practitioners might provide to parents in such circumstances include leaflets, brochures, booklets and links to websites and apps that provide information about topics related to child mental health, such as:

- general information about the impact of separation on children’s social and emotional wellbeing
- tips on how to support and enhance children’s social and emotional wellbeing through separation; and
- tips for how to manage conflict in the inter-parental relationship and what not to do.

Useful resources on children and separation

Useful resources that practitioners can use to learn about and provide information about the impact of separation on children:

- [Because it’s for the kids: Building a secure parenting base after separation](#) – an e-book on the effects of parental conflict on child development.
- An information sheet on [helping children cope with separation and divorce](#).
- Emerging Minds’ step-by-step guide to [sharing information with parents about children’s social and emotional wellbeing](#).
- Emerging Minds’ short course on [engaging with parents](#).
- [raisingchildren.net.au](#)’s information on [relationships and development](#).



Providing referrals to specialised services

Anne's story (cont.)

Anne believes that if she had had access to the right knowledge and support, she would have left her abusive partner much earlier, reducing the negative effects on her and her children's mental health and wellbeing. She wishes that she had received a referral to a family mediation service early in the separation process, to help her and her partner separate more amicably.

Anne also wishes that her daughter could have received a referral to a mental health service much earlier to help support her through the psychological struggles she was experiencing. Anne believes that what she needed was not isolated referrals to different practitioners, but someone who understood the whole system and would help to connect the dots for her.

Anne eventually found an all-round social worker who had this type of knowledge, and guided her through the various options for separation-related specialist services. The social worker also helped her interpret legal and specialised language – such as that used by the police and the Family Law Court – which she otherwise found difficult to understand. Finding this social worker to support her made a significant difference to her situation.

Providing information on child wellbeing goes hand-in-hand with referrals to specialist services, activities and programs that may be helpful to families during separation. Each state and territory in Australia has services where children and parents can receive assistance during separation. As Anne's story indicates, being put in touch with services that are interconnected and holistic can be helpful to parents who may be struggling to navigate various systems related to separation. See the Appendix for examples of services that can be referred to during separation.

Using the services of a qualified family mediator is an effective way to resolve conflict and compose parenting plans that are more objective and take the child's needs into consideration (Clark, 2013). Parents need to be encouraged to develop a respectful, businesslike relationship, with clear boundaries and ground rules.

The Australian Government provides a range of targeted services for separating families, including dispute resolution, family counselling, divorce education programs, co-parenting programs, children's programs, and children's contact services.

There are 65 government-funded Family Relationship Centres (FRCs) in Australia, which are run by community-based organisations (e.g. Relationships Australia, Centacare) and where parents can be referred for assistance with their separation and parenting plans.

Australian family law requires that separating parents participate in a mediation process called family dispute resolution before applying to the Family Court for parenting orders (Family Court of Australia, n.d.). In instances where families might benefit from mediation and dispute resolution, practitioners can refer them to FRCs or to other similar services.

Practice ideas for referring to specialised family services

- **Provide information** about mediation, family dispute resolution and other appropriate services for separating families.
- Try to **understand** how the parent might be feeling and what would help them and their children. Ask yourself the following questions to help guide your actions:
 - What type of support does this parent want?
 - How can I use my role to help this person?
 - What resources and phone numbers can I give this person?
 - What connections do I have to local allied health services?
 - Can I give them an extra 10 minutes?
 - Can I make the call on their behalf? (Apply only if you have the parents' permission and it doesn't disempower them.)
 - Who can I connect them with that will be able to really help them?
 - Can I push referrals faster?
 - What can I do to ensure they receive long-term ongoing support?
 - What type of information is likely to be most accessible/helpful to this person (e.g. online, print, language)?
- Where appropriate, **support** parents to engage with parenting programs and other parenting interventions shown to have a positive effect on the children and co-parenting relationship.

The parents who were consulted for this resource emphasised that the provision of information and referrals needs to come from a place of compassion and empathy. When a parent is struggling, it is important that a practitioner exercises their professional and organisational duty of care; and organises regular follow-up sessions to check in with them, ensures they are getting the necessary help from other services, and supports them until their situation improves.

“

Have some compassion and empathy. Stop and think and put yourself in that person's shoes and just question, how would this be for you? So you have a little understanding of how that parent is feeling in that moment they're coming to you. That everything is not great, and things can be hard. And here they are having to trust somebody. ... Giving that person some time, but also questioning, 'How can I help, other than giving the standard little bit? How can I go that bit further?'

SEPARATED PARENT OF FOUR CHILDREN

Separation involving family violence

Separation and divorce are often associated with increased parental distress, disruption of the home environment, financial stress, conflict over parental responsibility and visitation, and reductions in the quality and quantity of parent-child interactions (Amato, 2010; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Xerxa et al., 2020). Separation is also a risk point for the escalation of domestic and family violence (Kaspiew et al., 2017). Leaving a violent partner may increase the risk of violence after separation as the perpetrator attempts to gain or reassert control (Campbell et al., 2003; Fleury, Sullivan, & Bybee, 2003; Hotton, 2001).

This section provides practice ideas for practitioners who engage with parents who may be experiencing family and domestic violence. Not all practitioners will feel comfortable discussing these more complex topics with parents, and may prefer to only ask simple questions and provide information and referrals to more appropriately qualified services as discussed above. Practitioners must be familiar with the mandatory reporting requirements on child abuse and neglect in their state or territory, as outlined in the following section.

Mandatory reporting of child abuse and neglect

When offering support to separating parents, it is important to respect the parents' knowledge and understanding of their children's safety, but it is also vital to stay alert to signs of child abuse and neglect. Practitioners must be aware of their mandatory and organisational reporting responsibilities for cases of suspected child abuse and neglect.

Each Australian state and territory has mandatory reporting legislation, which outlines the occupations that are mandated to report and the types of abuse that have to be reported. Occupations that have close contact with children, such as teachers, early childhood education and care practitioners, doctors, nurses and police, are most frequently required to engage in mandatory reporting, but in some cases (e.g. the Northern Territory), every adult is obligated to report child abuse and neglect.

Staying alert to potential child abuse and neglect may require remaining vigilant to signs such as a child:

- having frequent injuries or unexplained bruises, welts or cuts
- always being watchful as if expecting something bad to happen
- wearing inappropriate clothing (dirty, or inappropriate for the weather)
- sleep disturbance
- frequently being late or missing school
- showing extremes in behaviour (e.g. being extremely aggressive or compliant)
- poor attachment to caregiver; or
- showing inappropriate sexual behaviour for their age.

For a detailed list of abuse and neglect indicators, see [Indicators of abuse or neglect](#).

For more details on mandatory reporting across Australia, see [Mandatory reporting of child abuse and neglect](#); [Reporting child abuse and neglect: Information for service providers](#), or seek advice from a domestic violence hotline such as [1800Respect](#) (National Sexual Assault, Family & Domestic Violence Counselling Line).

The knowledge that a practitioner is required to report child abuse and neglect could act as a barrier to some parents' willingness to discuss their children's wellbeing, particularly if the parent is in a vulnerable situation, such as experiencing family violence or engaging in substance use. One of the parents we consulted, who was in a vulnerable situation, told us that she found it helpful when her drug and alcohol counsellor outlined the boundaries of what she was mandated to report and what could be discussed confidentially. This type of transparency made it easier for the parent to trust the counsellor enough to open up, and understand what conversations were on and off the table.

Anne's story (cont.)

Anne and her children lived in a household where family violence was perpetrated by her (then) partner. Because Anne had experienced abuse during her childhood, she did not recognise family violence for what it was. She says that in those days (around 2012), awareness and conversations about family violence were less common, and the service providers she contacted did not help her recognise it or support her to change the situation.

She later found the support she needed from a psychologist and a family counsellor. They were open to discussing family violence and put her own wellbeing and that of her children first. Anne found the experiences with the family counsellor particularly empowering. The counsellor identified family violence for what it was and told Anne, *'Your children are not safe staying in this relationship.'*

Hearing this had a profound impact on Anne and helped her to make the decision to leave her partner almost immediately. *'She called it'*, Anne says. *'I needed to hear someone say that.'* By hearing the issue reframed in terms of her children's safety, the decision to leave her partner became much easier to make. When in doubt, Anne still goes back to that conversation to help her put her children's needs first.

Anne's advice to practitioners who come into contact with families experiencing family violence is to *'keep the kids up there in focus'* and practise brutal honesty when it comes to the wellbeing of children.

Experiencing family violence is traumatic and can have long-lasting negative impacts on children (Hughes et al., 2017; Qu, Weston, Moloney, Kaspiw, & Dunstan, 2014). It is a key concern for many separating parents (McIntosh, Wells, & Lee, 2016; Wells, Lee, Li, Tan, & McIntosh, 2018). Australian research shows that children can have poorer developmental outcomes and decreased wellbeing (including anxiety, depression, behavioural and social difficulties, and difficulties at school) when their families are affected by violence, abuse or other safety concerns, particularly if these conditions are ongoing (Kaspiw et al., 2017; Qu et al., 2014).

Life-long decreases in health, and increased experiences of violence, mental illness and substance abuse are all associated with childhood exposure to violence (Hughes et al., 2017). More

immediately, children can be physically hurt during violent episodes, suffer from sleeping and eating disturbances, and have difficulties forming attachments with their caregivers. Even where children do not experience family violence directly, they often know it is happening between their parents, and the awareness that one parent is hurting the other is extremely distressing for them (raisingchildren.net.au, 2019).

Australian studies over the past 10 years have found that around one-quarter of mothers and under one-fifth of fathers experienced physical violence before separation and almost all of these parents also reported experiencing at least one form of emotional abuse (Kaspiw et al., 2017). These experiences increased during separation, but physical violence decreased post-separation, while experiences of emotional abuse remained steady over time. Parental experiences of violence or abuse were also associated with poorer inter-parental relationships and emotional health, safety concerns and financial hardship (Kaspiw, et al., 2017).

Providing the necessary assistance that parents, especially mothers, and children affected by family violence might need is complex. It may include targeted therapy for abuse victims, finding appropriate housing and financial assistance, legal services for safety and parenting arrangements, medical and psychological needs, and specialist family violence services (Kaspiw et al. 2017). Arranging this type of assistance will be out of the scope of the professional role of most of the practitioners for whom this resource is written. However, asking parents about their and their children's safety and support needs in order to refer them to more appropriately qualified services is something that most social, health and welfare professionals can do.



Parent and practitioner experiences

“

There is absolutely no harm, that if a GP or [another] practitioner is very worried about their client and they can see that they are not OK [that they ask about their safety]. Women in domestic violence situations sometimes need someone to say, ‘I’m really worried about your safety, and I have to do something and I’m going to call this person and this person.’ [Women affected by family violence] are in such survival mode that they often don’t think, ‘How can I make the steps to move out of this situation?’ It becomes ‘I need to survive’, literally getting from the bed to the bathroom.

RELATIONSHIP COUNSELLOR

The practitioners and parents consulted during the development of this resource agreed that even professionals who are not trained in family violence need to ask simple inquiry questions about the wellbeing of separating parents and their children. It is important to show vulnerability and humanity and call a specialist agency or submit an online query where additional help is needed. The quote above from an experienced counsellor who works with women affected by family violence illustrates that they are often in survival mode and may not have the capacity to enact solutions. Taking additional steps to help victims of violence is often necessary.

The practitioners agreed that it is important to ask separating parents about their children, but the success of that conversation will depend on a range of factors, including the way the questions are asked, the parent’s psychological state, values around disclosing personal information, the type of relationship the parent has with the professional, and the environment in which the questioning takes place. A more cautious approach may need to be taken when speaking to perpetrators of family violence.

While one practitioner affirmed that in the family violence cases they assisted, the majority of motivation to change came out of love for the children, another cautioned against moving towards questions about the children too quickly. If the questions come across as shaming or accusatory, parents may disengage or give incomplete information. For some parents, the topic of discussing their children might be too emotionally charged and result in feelings of anger or sadness.

The practitioners agreed that bringing children’s needs into focus was paramount, and that in most cases, if done with compassion, empathy and understanding, the parent was likely to open up and benefit from the intervention.



What can practitioners do to support parents and their children?

“

Don’t be afraid to ask about the experience of children. Three-quarters of motivation to change comes out of love for children.

FAMILY VIOLENCE COUNSELLOR

Even where there are concerns about children’s safety, it is important to communicate to parents affected by family violence that they are important and that prioritising their own wellbeing will also be good for their children. They may need support with arranging and attending appointments, including practical support such as money for public transport to get to appointments or having someone else make calls for them; and with providing application forms and other information. Referrals to ongoing, holistic, long-term support and regular check-ins with the person can also be helpful to improve their and their children’s wellbeing.

However, given the lasting detrimental effects that experiences of family violence have on children, practitioners need to be strong in communicating to parents that this type of hostility must be prevented, and all attempts possible must be made to protect the children. Where a practitioner does not have the necessary skills, they can refer to specialist services, mediation, parenting programs and other interventions. Mandatory reporting of child abuse and neglect may also be necessary in some circumstances.

Practice ideas for asking about family violence

These are some approaches practitioners who are not trained in dealing with family violence can take when they encounter families experiencing family violence:

- **Slowly build up to asking about family violence.** If you suspect that family violence or abuse might be happening, start by asking about the parent's/child's wellbeing, but be careful and sensitive in how you broach the topic of family violence. Do not ask about 'hitting' or 'safety' until the parent opens up. Begin with broad questions, such as, *'How is everyone in the family going?'* and *'How is everyone coping?'* Slowly broach the subject of family violence by asking questions like, *'Has anyone else said they're really worried about you?'*, *'Are there times when you have felt fear in your relationship?'* or *'Have you ever been hurt by your partner in a way that wasn't an accident?'*
- **Bring children's experiences into focus.** After you have asked broad questions, give the parent an opportunity to reflect on the whole family by asking questions specifically about the children:
 - *'How are the children coping?'*
 - *'Do you think the kids are feeling safe?'*
 - *'Have your children said anything to indicate they may not feel safe and secure?'*
 - *'When you are highly stressed, what do you think your child feels?'*

For a full list of practice questions on how to explore the impact of adversity on children, see the [PERCS Conversation Guide: Family and domestic violence](#) by Emerging Minds.

- **Use motivation and commitment to children to build reflection.** Most parents, even those who engage in family violence, love their children. This foundational commitment can be used to get perpetrators of family violence to reflect on their actions and seek help.
 - Try asking them about their personal relationship goals and intentions with the children: *'What's really important to you in relation to your children?'*; *'How often would you like to see your children?'*
 - Try acknowledging that anger can take over, and talk about how this may impact on the child: *'I know it's hard to talk about, but have there been times when your children have been around the abusive behaviour?'*; *'How did they react?'*; *'What do you think they felt?'*

- **Discuss help and support.** Parents who experience family violence need personal and professional support to deal with the situation. Discussing what they need to improve the situation is an important step towards seeking solutions. Try asking:
 - *'Who else knows about this?'*
 - *'Do you have enough support?'*
 - *'What support do you need to look after your wellbeing?'*
 - *'What do you find helps and how can you get more of this support?'*
 - *'What helps you to soothe yourself?'*
 - *'There are people who can help you put the wellbeing of your children first. Would you like a referral?'*
- **Make appropriate referrals.** It is important to make genuine inquiries about the type of services a separating parent experiencing family violence might need. Some may need referrals to family violence and child protection services, while others may need housing, legal or financial support. It is important to keep in mind that people experiencing family violence may be extremely vulnerable and you may be the first person they have reached out to or who has had this conversation with them.
 - Acknowledge their difficult situation by saying something like, *'I hear that this is really tough for you.'*
 - Offer help: *'I know services that can support you.'*
 - Make the call for them, provide them with brochures or phone numbers and be sure to follow up with them at a later point. Where possible, referrals should be made to ongoing, long-term support.
- **Request support personnel at appointments.** In cases where safety is a concern, and with the client's permission, encourage a family violence worker or a domestic violence police officer to attend the next appointment.
- **Report the abuse.** If you suspect that a child is experiencing abuse and/or neglect, you will need to report it to the relevant authorities (see the previous section on mandatory reporting). It is important that you are clear and transparent about your mandatory reporting obligations before you engage with separating families. Transparency builds trust and helps parents to decide the type of information they choose to disclose.

Summary

Separation is common in Australia, and it is important that a wide range of professionals are able to support children and families affected by separation to achieve the best possible outcomes for their health and wellbeing.

For some families, separation is a difficult process and can be one of the most challenging periods in life. Parental distress and acrimony can have negative consequences for the children's development and wellbeing. Experiences of family violence are traumatic, with adverse impacts that can last a lifetime. Supporting parents to look after their own wellbeing, co-parent effectively and focus on the needs of their children can help to support a family's transition and improve children's wellbeing during and after separation.

Most families in Australia navigate separation without assistance from professional family dispute resolution services. However, separating families come into contact with a range of practitioners who are not trained in family dispute resolution or counselling, such as GPs, social workers, allied health providers, case managers, teachers and educators. It is vital that these practitioners have the awareness and skills to ask about parents' and children's wellbeing during separation, and to refer them to appropriate services if necessary.

This resource has synthesised evidence on family separation involving different magnitudes of distress, shared personal experiences and provided practice ideas that practitioners can draw on when assisting separating families. A key point throughout is to adopt a child-centred approach to practice and, unless it is likely to cause severe anger or distress, to always bring the child's wellbeing into focus, either by asking the parent or, if present, asking the child directly. In cases where families are severely distressed and/or experiencing family violence, practitioners may need to make additional effort to help them by arranging appointments, making calls, providing information and referring them to long-term support.



Further resources

[PERCS Conversation Guide](#) on exploring the impact of adversity on children. This guide presents exploratory questions to help facilitate parents' engagement in their child's wellbeing.

[Talking to parents about family and domestic violence](#): This short article is based on the longer paper, *Piloting PERCS: An early intervention and prevention strategy for children living with violence and parental substance use*.

[Supporting children who have experienced trauma](#): This e-learning course examines the impact of trauma on a child and key perspective shifts practitioners can adopt to place the child at the centre of all practice engagement.

[Intergenerational mental health](#): This e-learning course is about enabling prevention and early intervention with parents or children. This course describes three elements of an intergenerational lens which can support children's mental health in the context of family mental health.

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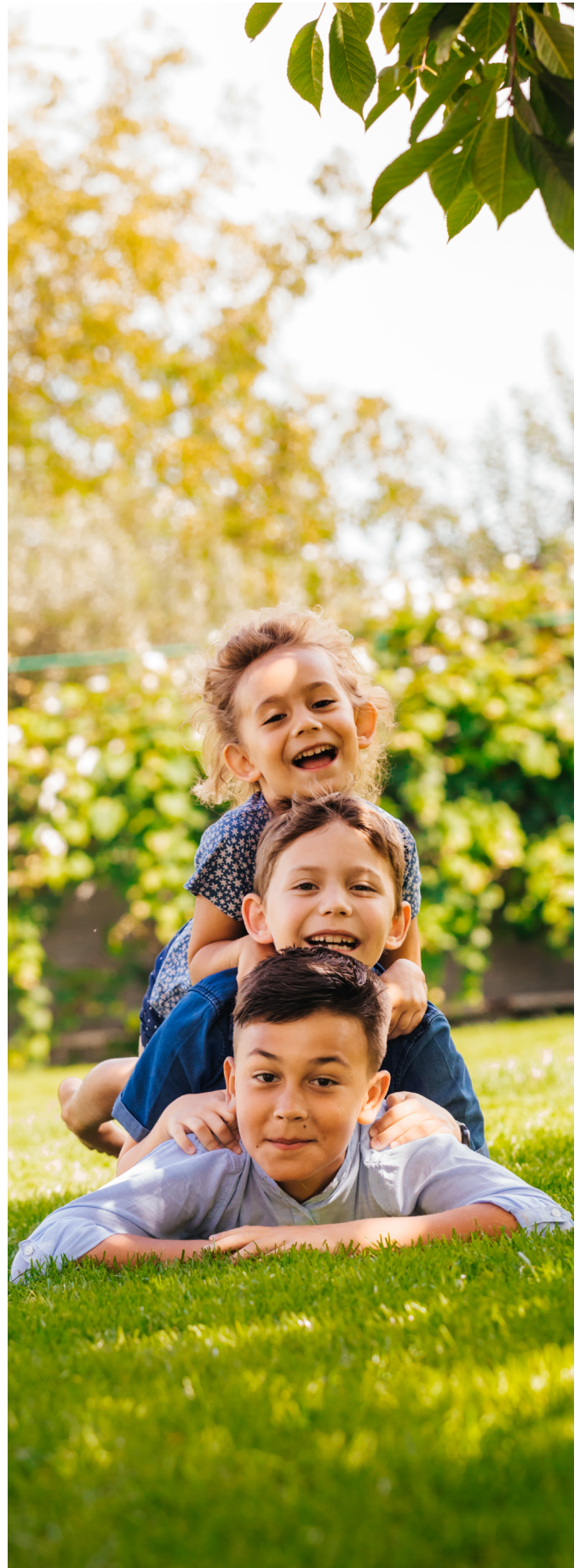
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Appendix: Examples of services for separating families

Several national not-for-profit organisations that specialise in family wellbeing (e.g. Relationship Matters, Family Relationships Australia, Relationships Australia) offer a suite of services, ranging from counselling to mediation and legal aid. Referrals may include, but not be limited to:

- mental health helplines which provide free online counselling (e.g. [Lifeline](#), [Counselling Online](#))
- child mental health counsellors and psychologists
- parenting support programs and courses to develop parenting skills and strengthen the child–parent relationship (e.g. [Relationship Matters](#), [Relationships Australia](#))
- counselling services and information repositories on mental health and wellbeing (e.g. [Relationship Matters](#), [Beyond Blue](#))
- family relationship services (e.g. [Relationships Australia](#))
- family dispute resolution and mediation services (e.g. [Family Relationship Advice Line](#) is a national telephone service that helps to connect families with local family dispute resolution services)
- legal aid services (e.g. [Relationship Matters](#))
- financial aid services (e.g. [The Salvation Army](#), [Centrelink](#))
- family violence services (e.g. [Berry Street](#), [Men's Domestic Violence Helpline](#), [1800RESPECT](#))
- drug and alcohol services (e.g. [Alcohol and Drug Foundation](#) helpline, [Turning Point](#) list, [Narcotics Anonymous](#), [Alcoholics Anonymous](#))
- no-cost/low-cost community events; and
- peer support for parents (adapted from McDonald, 2018).



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