

# Emerging Minds Families

## FACT SHEET

# Parenting after a separation or divorce

Emerging Minds acknowledges that families come in many forms. For the purposes of easy reading, the term 'parent' encompasses the biological, adoptive, foster and kinship carers of a child, as well as individuals who have chosen to take up primary or shared responsibility in raising that child.

All children are affected by the quality of the relationships around them. After parents separate or get a divorce, children can adjust and have better mental health and social and emotional wellbeing when:

- they have a strong and supportive relationship with their parent/s; and
- their parents are able to communicate and co-parent positively.

This resource offers tips for separated parents about:

- [keeping or rebuilding a supportive relationship with your child](#)
- [co-parenting that supports children's wellbeing](#)
- [communicating respectfully with and about the other parent.](#)



## Keeping or rebuilding a supportive relationship with your child

What children need from their parents after they separate is exactly what they needed before: to feel safe, secure and cared for.

When you're navigating a separation or divorce, it's normal to be 'caught up' in your own emotions, stressed and irritable, and sometimes overwhelmed. At those times it can be difficult to parent in the way you used to or the way you want to. On the other hand, some parents feel relief, joy and hopefulness about the future.

This can be an opportunity to think about the kind of parent you want to be, and perhaps make some changes and build even stronger relationships with your children.

It can be helpful to find time to consider these questions:

- What is important to you as a parent?
- What kind of relationship do you want to have with your child?
- What could you do differently?
- How do you hope your child will remember you, and the relationship you had, when they look back on this time?

- What values would you like your child to learn from you? How do you demonstrate those values?
- Is there anything about parenting you want to learn or work on?
- What do you want your child to see and remember about how you and their other parent communicate and make plans for them?
- Who in your support network will understand why these things are important to you and support you to parent the way you want to? Who will be there for you when you need a break or some support?

Your answers to these questions will help you stay focused on the type of parent you want to be and to act and make decisions in line with your parenting values. This will strengthen your relationships with your children and make you feel more confident and satisfied in your parenting, too.

### What you can do

There are some everyday things you can do to stay connected and strengthen your relationship with your child:

- Find one-on-one time for your child (or each of your children if you have more than one). It can be hard to find the time and energy every day, but look for pockets of time you can talk, play or just hang out with your child. This helps your child feel connected and safe and gives them space to ask questions or share any concerns with you.
- When you are together, give them your full attention. Tune in to what they're interested in or want to do with you and how they're feeling.
- Have fun! Squirt them with the hose. Tell bad jokes (or send your pre-teen silly GIFs). Play hide and seek.
- Provide them with lots of reassurance and affection. Show how happy you are to see them again after they've been at school or childcare or their other parent's house by greeting them with a smile and a hug.
- Be clear and firm about family rules, and what behaviour is and isn't acceptable. Understanding that everyone is dealing with stresses doesn't mean ignoring behaviour that you wouldn't normally allow. Children feel secure when they know what the family rules and limits are.

Predictable routines and familiar activities are important for children. Keeping the following things in mind will help children adjust and settle into the 'new normal' after you and your partner separate:

- Stick to daily and weekly routines and allow children to continue their usual activities like sport or music as much as possible. It's important to keep them connected to friends and doing the things that they enjoy.
- After all the changes and stresses, you might need to reintroduce routines around mealtimes, getting ready for school/childcare in the mornings and winding down/getting ready for bed in the evenings.
- When children are going between two homes it's important that they know what to expect. Having some consistent routines in both homes can help. Generally young children don't have a good sense of time and might confuse days, so it can be helpful to use visual reminders like a calendar or weekly planner with pictures to help them understand what's happening each day.
- It also can be helpful to have a 'settling in' routine each time a child arrives at one parent's home – it could be a cuddle on the sofa as they tell the parent what's been happening at school, or some alone time in their room reading or playing music.

While it won't work for everyone, some families told us they chose 'bird-nesting' at first – where children stay in the family home and their separated parents move in and out on a rotating basis (e.g. one lives in the home for a week, then the other moves in for a week) – as a way of keeping stability and familiarity (same rooms, school, routines) for the child.

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**[Research shows] children can be highly adaptable and resilient to living between two homes after separation as long as there's a really clear routine [and] stability. As long as children know that every Monday Mum picks me up from school and that we have spaghetti for dinner and Dad takes me to basketball practice every Wednesday, and Thursdays I go to OSHC and so on, it takes the guesswork out of being a child [with separated parents].**

ROXANNE NATHAN, COUNSELLING  
TEAM LEADER, RELATIONSHIPS  
AUSTRALIA



## Co-parenting that supports children's wellbeing

'Co-parenting' is a term for the relationship between parents who are not partners anymore but who share responsibility for raising their children.

**When separated parents are able to move as smoothly and quickly as possible to a positive co-parenting relationship, it greatly supports children's wellbeing.**

Positive co-parenting means:

- making sure your child knows you both care for them and want to do what's best for them
- cooperating to make plans and arrangements for your child's care
- keeping the focus on your child's needs and interests, and considering their views
- communicating respectfully – not criticising or blaming the other parent
- trying not to argue or show bad feelings towards each other.

The way you and your co-parent behave and communicate in front of your child has a great impact on their wellbeing, now and in the future.

### Making arrangements

Developing a healthy co-parenting arrangement isn't always easy or straightforward. It can be challenging, and discussing and agreeing on care arrangements and financial responsibilities can take time.

Before you start trying to plan or negotiate arrangements with your former partner, it might help to consider your answers to these questions:

- How would you describe the kind of relationship you want with the other parent into the future?
- What is important to you in terms of how you go about working with the other parent going forward?
- When you're working out arrangements with the other parent, what will help you keep your child's needs, interests and wellbeing in focus?
  - What might make that difficult to do?
- When your children are older and look back on this time of their life, how would you like them to remember and describe how you worked with the other parent?
- What are some of the things you're currently doing to try to reduce the amount of conflict that your child might see or be aware of?
- What have you heard or learnt from other people you know about different types of parenting arrangements after separation?
  - Which are you most drawn to?
  - Which might work for you and the other parent right now?
  - Which are out of the question for you (or them)?

Often, care arrangements need to change over time as children grow up and their needs, interests and activities change. For example, very young children might need more time with their primary caregiver, while older children might need flexibility to maintain their peer relationships and sport, school or work commitments.

If it's safe and appropriate for your child, be willing to try different arrangements and agree to review and make changes if things aren't working. For example, if your child is about to start school, you might agree that they live with the parent closest to the school most days of the week until they settle in, and that you'll review how that's working at the end of the first term.

If you and the other parent are unable to agree on parenting arrangements, get help from a family mediator or counsellor. Find out about [family counselling services](#) or call the [Family Relationship Advice Line](#) on 1800 050 321.

## What you can do

Parents who have been through a separation or divorce, and health professionals who have worked with separating parents, told us what helps parents develop a positive and cooperative relationship that supports children.

### ***Focus on what's best for your child***

Research shows children of separating parents coped better when their parents were able to see the situation from their child's perspective, understand their needs and focus on what was going to be best for their child.<sup>1</sup> Parents are more likely to cooperate and agree if they're both committed to doing so.

Thinking about your child's needs and feelings, and trying to maintain as much 'normality' as possible for them, usually leads to decisions that will best support their wellbeing.

### ***Shift how you see your ex-partner***

Rather than seeing your former partner as your ex (and focusing on all the things you don't like), try seeing them as your child's other parent, whom they love and will have an ongoing relationship with.

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**I was really mindful of doing my very best not to get upset and angry about my ex with [my kids]. I recognised that wouldn't help anything. It was their dad, and they were going to be spending time with him ... And it was my job not to help him, but to help them create that relationship with him.**

EMI, PARENT OF FOUR

### ***Agree on the 'essentials'***

You may not be able to reach an agreement on everything, but try to decide together what's most important to your child's wellbeing that you'll always tell the other parent and discuss together.

For example, you might accept that your child won't eat as much healthy food when they're at their other parent's home, but decide that sticking to the same night-time routine and bedtime is important.

Try to agree on the issues that you'll keep each other informed about – like any health issues, injuries, school reports or feedback from their teacher, and important events or activities coming up. One parent

talked about having a shared folder online where they and their partner put their children's notices, diary dates and appointments, 'so we both know what is going on.'

### ***Try different methods of communicating***

If talking is too difficult in the early stages of your separation, what else could you try? Some parents find using email works best, and texts only for emergencies or if they're running late for pickup, for example. Others have found it helpful to use apps designed to enable separated parents to communicate and share information and children's weekly schedules. Over time, in-person communications might become more relaxed – and it's helpful for children to see their parents are able to talk to one another.

### ***Stick to plans – but also be flexible***

Once you and the other parent agree on plans, it's important you both stick to them. Children need some certainty at this time. They need clear and reliable arrangements for their care, so they know what to expect.

Children also adjust better when their parents are willing to be flexible – when there are special events or reasons that they might prefer to stay at one parent's home instead of the other's, for example. If parenting arrangements aren't flexible it can negatively affect children's wellbeing. When children feel their views are not considered, they might feel disappointed, upset, frustrated or anxious.

This doesn't mean you need to always do what your child wants – but it is important for children to feel heard and have their views considered.

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**Like, you know, it'd be awesome if I could just say, "Right, OK, I'm only coming this weekend". Or to be able to say, "Right, me and my girlfriends, we're going out to the movies ... we're going back to so and so's place for a sleepover". ... Like, I want to be able to say that. I want it to be flexible.**

ZOE, 12-14 YEARS OLD<sup>2</sup>

## Communicating respectfully

It's common for separating or separated parents to have challenges communicating, but for your child's (and your own) wellbeing it's important to find positive ways to interact.

Children adjust and feel better when their parents are able to be respectful towards, and about, one another.

It helps to remember that your former partner is your child's mum or dad – so they're likely to feel upset or angry if you say things about their other parent that are critical or unkind.

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**I think you've always got to bear in mind that your children love the other person even though you might not love them anymore, or you might feel really angry, bitter or resentful ... because if you don't understand that or take that into consideration, you can say some stuff that's just not going to sit with them and you can really alienate yourself from your own children.**

JOHN, DAD OF THREE

### Some tips for behaving and communicating respectfully

#### ***Stay focused on the type of person and parent you want to be***

Go through the list of questions in the previous section if you haven't already. You might like to write down some reminders – like 'I will stay calm', or 'What does [your child's name] need from me today?' – and stick them on your bathroom mirror so you see them each morning.

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**I think a lot in terms of what type of person I want to be. When a situation arises, that's what I think about: "What's important to me?". The type of mother I am, the type of daughter I am, the friend I am – that's what's important to me.**

AMANDA, MUM OF TWO



***Think about how your child might be affected*** by the way you and their other parent behave or talk to or about one another. What might your child see, hear or feel when you and their other parent are together, or talking on the phone? Do you think about how you react or what you say about their other parent after you've had an interaction with them?

Also remember that the way you talk to your child about their other parent, or ask questions about them, can make them uncomfortable, confused or upset. Make sure you're not using your child as a messenger, making them feel pressured to choose a side, or that they have to try to 'fix' the communication problems between you and your ex-partner.

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**We have agreed to not talk poorly of the other with the kids. This can be really difficult, but it's important for the kids to see us as the best parents we can be.**

ANONYMOUS, MUM OF THREE

## Remember that your child is a child

Don't discuss 'adult issues', like financial arrangements or the details of court proceedings, with your child or in front of your child. Use your own support network when you need to express your frustration or anger, or need help problem solving or brainstorming different options.

It is OK though to show your feelings, for example to cry in front of your child. Seeing how you express and manage your emotions helps them to express theirs too.

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**I was a 'shower-crier' and noticed the negative impacts that hiding my emotions had on my daughter. Now I cry in front of my kids and let them know that Mum is sad at the moment, but she'll be OK and here's some things she'll do to feel better.**

ANONYMOUS, PARENT OF TWO



When parents can cooperate and communicate effectively, it helps lessen the impacts of separation and divorce and supports their child's wellbeing.

It's common for parents to feel like they can't change their post-separation parenting situation because of the other parent's nature or behaviour. If you feel like that, it can be helpful to think about what you can control, like how you respond and behave. Focusing on these things helps you manage your emotions and is better for your wellbeing, and your child's.

While tension and disagreements are common at first, many separating and separated parents have managed, over time, to develop respectful and positive co-parenting relationships. Often parents say things got 'better and better' as they worked out ways to put aside negative feelings and stay focused on what was best for their child.

## Further resources

Check out the following resources for more information on supporting children through a separation or divorce:

**Talking to your child about separation and divorce**



**Looking after yourself during a separation or divorce**



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## References

1. Dunk-West, P. (2018) *Being child-centred: A guide for parents who are separating or separated*. Flinders University.
2. Carson, R., Dunstan, E., Dunstan, J., & Roopani, D. (2018). *Children and young people in separated families: Family law system experiences and needs*, p. 40. Australian Institute of Family Studies.