

Separation anxiety hurts the kids

“Children sweeten labours; but they make misfortunes more bitter”

Francis Bacon 1561-1626

It's more than 400 years since the English philosopher made this wry observation on parenting. It's a statement that will ring true for many parents struggling to come to terms with their new roles as separated parents.

Suddenly the former united team of two parents in a stable partnership has been torn asunder, and it's going to take some time and hard work to establish a new way of parenting under the changed circumstances.

The good news is that there are so many couples and their children who do this very successfully. The reputation of parenting after separation has been painted rather blacker than it need be.

The most important starting point to managing parenting after separation is to make it clear to the children that they are loved and valued by both parents no matter what's going on between the adults.

A surprising number of children carry an enormous burden of responsibility for the breakdown of a relationship.

“If only I had been good, Mum and Dad wouldn't have shouted at each other and we'd all be together still”.

If the situation isn't explained to children, they will make up a story to explain it and usually the story is much more dramatic than reality.

Be aware that conflict between parents is particularly distressing for children who are experiencing their parents' separation.

Separate your couple disputes from your parenting disputes – try to put aside the issues that concern just the two of you when you're dealing with arrangements for the children. After all, you conceived them in love and they have the right to be treated with love and kept out of the adult-to-adult firing line. While that is a tall order, everyone benefits if you can do it.

Children also need to be reassured it is OK for them to love the other parent, and that they are not expected to take sides.

Children need constant reinforcement that the separation is not their fault, that both parents still love them to bits and that they will never be abandoned.

Some children are terribly frightened that because Mum and Dad have split they will be cast adrift. If adults can stop loving each other then perhaps they will also stop loving their children.

If you have a young child, try explaining their links with separated Mum and Dad as “magic love-lines”. These are special links between parents and children that never break. The magic love-lines can be drawn on a piece of paper to make them very tangible for little children.

If the separation is about to happen, give the children some warning – don't let them wake up one morning to find Mum or Dad is no longer sleeping at home.

It's also important to protect their emotional attachments in the wider family and community.

Try to keep them involved with their grandparents and friends, because they really are important in the children's lives. A loving, non-judgemental grandparent can be a great advantage for a child whose parents have separated, if this can be achieved.

If a small child is in childcare, try not to change the childcare arrangement – give them as much continuing stability as possible.

If you are struggling to sort out a co-operative parenting arrangement, use professional help. Mediators and counsellors can help parents discuss and make decisions about parenting after separation.

Survival tips

- **Be aware that conflict between separating parents is very distressing for the children**
- **Separate your couple disputes from your parenting issues**
- **Reassure the children that it is not their fault and that Mum and Dad still love them and will never abandon them.**