

Split parents must put kids first

When it comes to separation, one thing is usually clear – both parents plainly love their children and want to continue strong relationships with them.

However, this great love can come unstuck when they have to try and work out how to separate and still be Mum and Dad involved in the children's lives.

The degree of difficulty depends on how amicable the separation has been. This also applies to how well the children cope. While children will experience a loss when their parents separate, research has shown that they survive the separation well if they are not caught up in the conflict between their parents – the better the parents handle the separation, the better the young ones cope.

If a couple has been highly conflictual before separation, everything becomes magnified when handling parenting issues. Parents then compete for the children, much like they fight over assets such as the house, the car and the superannuation.

Separating parents go through a range of emotions, from feelings of rejection and anger to sadness and loss. Women may feel that the ex-partner didn't have much involvement in the children's lives before, and resents the fact that he wants them now.

On the other hand the man can feel that he's lost everything- his home and family - so he may try desperately to hang on to something. And that's how the children become the central battleground.

In this situation mediators and Family Dispute Resolution (FDR) practitioners ask parents to try to put aside their emotions and needs and think about what is in the best interests of their children. While it may seem an impossible task, it's vital that parents arrive at a workable agreement, because if they don't, the effects on the children can be damaging.

Research has shown that children suffer greatly when parents continue fighting after separation. Children from an acrimonious separation are at the highest risk for school truancy, low academic results and depression. Some can even become the victims of mental health issues, drug addiction, delinquency or homelessness.

If parents can put aside their personal issues and arrange an amicable post-separation parenting regime, they can expect that about two years down the track there will appear to be little difference between the wellbeing of children from intact and separated families. So it's well worth putting aside grievances and egos to think about what is best for the children, not what the adults want.

Because this can be so difficult it's helpful to use well the professional assistance available in the divorce process. Mediators experienced in dealing with separating couples are part of that process.

When parents separate children often worry that because one parent has left, the other will also leave them. They have insecurities about being loved and about where they are going to live. If the children have been at a private school and now need to be moved, that is an additional stress.

Children, even adult children, often have a desire for the parents to reunite. Younger children may have feelings of responsibility for the separation, wondering if they have been the cause. This can lead to thinking that if I'm good then perhaps Mum/Dad will come back.

Children want their parents to stop fighting and they know that they are the products of their parents, so if you constantly tell your child that you hate your ex-partner, they might feel that you also hate them.

Some separated fathers make the mistake of thinking that they must shower the children with gifts, but kids want the time with the other parent, not the treats.

Children aren't looking for their parents to be their best buddies- they need them to still be Mum and Dad. That's what matters to them.

Survival tips

- **Parents must put aside their own struggles and look at what is best for their children.**
- **If you can't do this get help from a mediator or Family Dispute Resolution practitioner.**
- **Children survive separation very well if the parents can stay co-operative and amicable.**