

Divorce or Separation

impact on children and adolescents

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Factsheet for parents and teachers

When parents no longer love each other and decide to live apart, a child can feel as if their world has been turned upside down. The level of upset the child feels can vary depending on how their parents separated, the age of the child, how much they understand, and the support they get from family and friends.

How are children affected?

A child may feel:

- a sense of loss – separation from a parent can mean you lose not only your home, but your whole way of life
- different, with an unfamiliar family
- worried about being left alone – if one parent can go, perhaps the other will
- angry at one or both parents for the split-up.
- responsible for having caused the split-up, guilty
- rejected and insecure
- torn between two parents.

Most children long to get back to normal, and for their parents to be together again. Even if the marriage or partnership has been very tense or violent, children may still have mixed feelings about the separation.

<http://www.trippin.co.nz>

It is important not to pull your child into the conflict. These tips may be useful:

- Don't ask your child to take sides: 'Who would you like to live with, darling?' Don't ask the your child what the other parent is doing.
- Don't use your child as a weapon to get back at your ex-partner.
- Don't criticise your ex-partner.
- Don't expect your child to take on the role of your ex-partner.

Whatever has gone wrong in the relationship, both parents still have a very important part to play in their child's life.

Emotional and behavioural problems

Emotional and behavioural problems in children are more common when their parents are fighting or splitting up. This can make a child very insecure. 'Babyish' behaviour (e.g. bedwetting, 'clinginess', nightmares, worries or disobedience) may be caused by the separation. This behaviour often happens before or after visits to the parent who is living apart from the family. Teenagers may show their distress by misbehaving or withdrawing into themselves. They may find it difficult to concentrate at school.

What can I do to help?

Parents whose marriage is splitting up can help their children. They should:

- make sure that the children know they still have two parents who love them, and will continue to care for them
- protect their children from adult worries and responsibilities
- make it clear that the responsibility for what is happening is the parents' and not the children's.

These things will help your child:

- Be open and talk. Your child not only needs to know what is going on, but needs to feel that it's OK to ask questions.
- Reassure them that they will still be loved and cared for by both parents.
- Make time to spend with your child.
- Be reliable about arrangements to see your child.
- Show that you are interested in your child's views, but make it clear that parents are responsible for the decisions.
- Carry on with the usual activities and routines, like seeing friends and members of the extended family.
- Make as few changes as possible. This will help your child feel that, in spite of the difficulties, loved ones still care about them and that life can be reasonably normal.

Where can I get help?

If you are finding it difficult to help your child cope, you may want to seek outside help. Your general practitioner will be able to offer support and advice. Usually parents are the ones who need help in sorting out their differences, so that they can fully support the child.

ACKNOWLEDGE:

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