



# TIP SHEET

## Understanding

### Children Coping with Separation and Divorce

When a family breaks up it is usually difficult for everyone. It is like a death which brings with it feelings of grief and loss. Most people need time to get used to the changes and each person's response can be very different. Parents try to grapple with their own feelings while they make practical and very important decisions that will affect the whole family.

Splitting up may mean the end of a special relationship between two adults, but not the end of a relationship between a child and a parent. Children need the ongoing love and support of both parents. The best outcome for a child is usually reached when both parents share the responsibility and all the decisions that affect their child. This means making a shift from being partners to parenting partners (something more like business partners).

Although most parents want to do their best, many parents do not handle this well and some create more suffering for their children who are already in pain from the break-up. The way in which parents handle splitting up and especially any conflict, has an enormous effect on the way children cope with their lives.

#### The Separation Process

The separation process is the same process you go through when a loved one dies - it is the process of grief. This process is painful and can take a long time, even years, for some parents to come through. Although people experience it differently, most people go through four main stages:

- Shock and denial - Things are very confusing, and it is hard to believe (or perhaps you don't want to believe) that the separation is actually happening.
- Sadness - Strong sense of loss, sometimes regret, sometimes guilt.
- Anger and blame - Sometimes we blame ourselves or our partner or someone else (whether or not they actually had anything to do with the situation).
- Resolution or moving forward - Accepting the situation, making adjustments to life and ourselves and getting on with a new future!

#### How Children React

Children can feel insecure and powerless when they see their family break-up. Children go through a grieving process, but often show it differently from adults. Because the child often does not really understand why it is happening they may feel:

- shocked
- angry and sad about the loss of the family unit
- abandoned or rejected by the parent who leaves
- afraid that if one parent has 'left' the other one may also leave
- confused about whether it is all right to love the parent who no longer lives with them
- guilty, as though the separation must somehow be their fault
- worried about the parent who is not living with them.

#### How Children Cope with Loss

Children do not usually show their pain and suffering all at once. They may seem to have got over it and then suddenly it reappears. Children, especially young ones, often don't have the words to express themselves clearly, so they can show their grief in different ways. Some may:

- become aggressive or 'naughty'
- withdraw
- become 'clingy'
- act younger than their age, for example children who have been toilet-trained may start to wet or soil again
- have nightmares, or find it hard to go to sleep
- change their eating patterns
- try to be really good at school and at home and because they appear to be coping, it's easy to think they are not suffering.
- try to stand up for the parent who is being put down. Some try to protect the parent who seems the weaker.
- show anger and hostility in play, with their toys, with brothers and sisters, with their friends or with you.
- show problems in their behaviour and get punished, which makes them feel worse.
- do well at school, others can't concentrate and slip backwards.

Being aware of the sort of feelings your child is going through may help you to understand your child's behaviour. Most children are confused and fearful about what will happen. Some are ashamed. They might not say to you what is worrying them because they don't want to see you upset or angry.

All these feelings are very normal and just as strong as your own. The only difference is that as an adult you are in a position to make choices and take some control over the decisions. Your children on the other hand feel extremely vulnerable and powerless. It is even more scary when children hear you talking about going to court - this is often linked with doing something wrong or breaking the law.

### What Parents Can Do

If a parent cannot accept a separation, then it is likely that the children will also have great difficulty accepting the situation.

- Let your children know they are loved and will be protected.
- Let them know that it is not their fault but the parents' responsibility.
- Give them a sense of you being in control, even if you don't feel it (this helps them feel safe).
- Try to avoid criticizing the other parent to your children - it makes them feel that they have to take sides. If you can't be positive, be at least neutral in what you say. Save your criticism to talk over with an understanding friend.
- Spend time with your children to talk about how they are feeling and coping with the separation. Hold them close and let them cry if they need to. Let them express their anger.
- Allow your children to love you both. Make it clear to children that they don't have to choose between their parents.
- Be tolerant with their behaviours - this may be the only way they can show how they feel.
- Remember that children usually want to please parents. One of the ways they do this is by telling you what they think you want to hear. "*I want to be with you*" may really mean "*I want to be with you and I want to be with the other parent too*".
- Show you understand their feeling towards you and the other parent.
- Keep things in your child's life as familiar as possible, eg home, school, friends, pets, toys, sport, clubs.
- Try to keep your children out of parental arguments. Never ask them to be messengers.
- It is never a good move to 'pump' children for information about the other parent.

- Be courteous and calm at 'handover' times. Arguments at handover times are particularly distressing to children.
- Give reassurance that you will be okay while they are away, and will be there when they return.
- Remember you can have a very good relationship with children even when you don't live with them.
- Be mindful of different parenting styles. The rules in the two households do not have to be the same. Children can adjust to this. It is important that parents don't undermine each other and so confuse and distress their children.
- Keep children in contact with grandparents and other relatives as this will help them know they belong and feel secure.
- Introduce a new partner gradually. This will usually be an awkward time for everyone. Parents often want their children to approve of the new partner. This can place pressure on children. Don't expect them to accept your new partner if they are still grieving over the loss of the other parent and the family unit. They can feel resentful.
- Think about and talk over how both parents can 'be there' at special events, sport etc. This is extremely difficult when there is hostility between parents. Sometimes parents need to put their child's feelings above their own.

FOR FURTHER HELP: If you have any questions or need further help contact your GP or the number detailed below. Psychologists employed by Queensland Psychology Centre have at least six years of education and training to equip them to provide a professional and timely service to you in the area of coping with separation