

8 TIPS FOR PARENTING AFTER SEPARATION

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1) Do not expose children to conflict

If there are problems on “change-overs” figure out a better way to handle them (i.e. – using a “contact centre”, getting assistance from friends or relatives, organising pick up and drop off at school where possible). If phone calls inevitably lead to conflict resolve not to talk when the children are around. Most important, respond to verbal attacks by being unwavering in your commitment to be kind and gentle and respectful.

2) Prioritise your own emotional stability

Take care of yourself, because your children know if you are struggling and it makes them fearful and insecure. Try your best to eat well, sleep well and exercise and don't feel guilty about having fun, going out or having time to yourself. Individual counselling can be a powerful tool for people going through separation, as can things like meditation and yoga.

3) Maintain logistical stability

Keep things as “normal” as possible in the children's routine. If they are used to going to their grandparents every Friday, try to ensure that continues to happen. If they are on a soccer team, or in dance lessons, try to make sure those things continue uninterrupted. Any continuity in a child's life is a real blessing for him at this time when the world is turning upside down.

4) Don't say anything bad about the other parent

We are literally made up of half of each of our parents. When you criticise your child's other parent, you are saying something bad about your child. Ironically, the only one hurt is your child, because your ex doesn't even know what was said. If you could “convince” your child that her other parent is a terrible person, what sort of victory would that be? Can you imagine how frightening a prospect it would be for a child to go visit, or depend upon, a parent she now believed was “evil”?

5) Tell the truth

Children always need to trust their parents and this is never more true than when everyone is going through the trauma of separation. Besides, as we've seen, you can't fool children anyway. This doesn't mean tell them everything but it does mean not to tell them things that aren't true. You are much better off saying “I don't want to tell you that” than making something up that is not really the truth.

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6) Use the three-part response to difficult statements

We cannot truthfully say “oh, how nice” every time our child repeats anything he or she was told by the other parent. For example, if your son comes home from his father and says “Mummy, Daddy says you’re a bitch”, how can you respond by being truthful (see #5 above) but also not saying anything bad (see #4 above). It is NOT easy, but there are three steps:

1. Ask the child how it made him feel (Prioritise the child’s feeling, not your reaction).
2. Tell the child how much you love her and maybe emphasise it with a big hug or cuddle.
3. If the child still wants to know WHY it was said, tell him you don’t know, and encourage him, in a loving way, to ask the other parent.

Of course, it is possible to follow these steps but use inflections and facial expressions that compromise what you’re trying to do. Try to remember, every interaction like this provides you an opportunity to protect and support your child, and if you roll your eyes, or adopt a sarcastic, mean spirited tone, the only one you are hurting is your child.

7) Do not ask questions about the other parent

This puts a child in a very difficult position. If your child says “Mummy and Bill took me to the park” RESIST the urge to ask who Bill is. If you need to know ask your former partner when your child isn’t around, but never use your child as a source of information. Let her choose what and how she wants to tell you about the other parent, and leave it at that.

8) Celebrate and support the other parent as much as you can

This isn’t easy, but it can be an amazing gift for your child. If your child brings up something that happened with the other parent you can truly be excited about it. Remember, this isn’t “fake” – focus on your joy that your child has another person who loves him, even if you are angry with or don’t like that person yourself. If you can send something to the other parent with the child, such as a school photo, it is a huge gift for the child (to see the cooperation). Remember your gift is for your child, not for your ex.