



# Children Coping with Separation and Divorce

FAMILY SERVICE TORONTO – FAMILIES IN TRANSITION

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# Separation and Divorce: Impact on children

Separation and divorce can be a difficult time for parents and children. Having to deal with so many changes, parents may be preoccupied with their own problems but still realize that they are the most important people in their children's lives.

There can be many reasons why some children struggle after their parents separate. Here are a few possible explanations:

## EMOTIONAL DISTRESS:

While parents may be devastated or relieved by their parents' breakup, children can be frightened and confused by the threat to their security. Some parents feel so hurt or overwhelmed by the breakup that they may turn to the child for comfort or direction. Children can also be confused because they don't know what is happening in the process of separation unless parents tell them what is happening. Children may feel a range of emotions in response to their parents' separation, including sadness, anger, confusion, and stress. These emotions can be difficult to process and may lead to behavioural or emotional issues.

## GUILT OF THE FAMILY BREAKDOWN:

Children often believe they have caused the conflict between their parents. Many children assume the responsibility for bringing their parents back together. Vulnerability to both physical and mental health can originate in the traumatic loss of one or both parents after the separation. With care and attention, however, a family's strengths can be mobilized during this time, and children can be helped to deal constructively with the resolution of parental conflict.

Changes in family structure: Separation often means that children experience significant changes in their family structure, such as moving to a new home or having to adjust to new living arrangements. These changes can be disruptive and stressful for children.

## PARENTAL CONFLICT:

Even if the parents are no longer living together, ongoing conflict between them can have a negative impact on children. Children may feel caught in the middle of their parents' disputes, which can be confusing and upsetting.

## **LOSS OF A PARENT'S INVOLVEMENT:**

If one parent is no longer involved in the child's life after separation, this can be difficult for children to process. Children may miss the absent parent and struggle with feelings of abandonment.

## **FINANCIAL HARDSHIP:**

Separation can also result in financial hardship for one or both parents, which can have a negative impact on children. Children may have to adjust to changes in their standard of living, which can be stressful and disruptive.

It's important to note that every child is unique, and the way that children respond to their parents' separation can vary widely. Some children may adjust relatively easily, while others may struggle for a prolonged period of time.

Parents should be aware if there are signs of persistent stress in their children. These may include loss of motivation for school, or for making friends or even for having fun. Other warning signs include sleeping too much or too little, or being unusually rebellious and argumentative within the family.

Children need to know that their parents will still be their parents even though the adult relationship is ending. Long parenting plan disputes or pressure on a child to "choose sides" can be particularly harmful for children.

Parents' ongoing commitment to the child's well-being is vital. If a child shows signs of stress, there are resources available at school as well as in the community, including at Aisling Discoveries to help your children.

## **Ways to Protect Children from Conflict**

The number one priority for parents is the protection and nurturing of their children. That priority does not change when parents separate or divorce. Most separating parents are so focused on the loss of the couple relationship that they forget their number one responsibility...to protect their children from the potential harmful effects of family breakdown.

Protecting children from conflict after separation is an important goal for all parents. Here are some steps that parents can take to reduce conflict and promote the well-being of their children:

### **PUT THE NEEDS OF THE CHILDREN FIRST:**

Parents should prioritize the needs of their children when making decisions about parenting plans and other aspects of co-parenting. This means putting aside personal differences and focusing on what is best for the children.

### **COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY:**

Parents should strive to communicate in a respectful and constructive manner, even if they disagree on certain issues. It may be helpful to establish clear boundaries and guidelines for communication, such as using a shared parenting app or email to keep things organized and civil.

### **AVOID SPEAKING NEGATIVELY ABOUT THE OTHER PARENT:**

Children can be hurt by negative comments or criticism of one parent by the other. Parents should avoid speaking negatively about each other in front of their children, and instead focus on promoting positive relationships between the children and both parents.

### **KEEP CHILDREN OUT OF DISPUTES:**

Parents should avoid involving their children in disputes or using them as messengers between the parents. Children should be shielded from adult conflicts and allowed to focus on being children.

### **SEEK SUPPORT:**

Separation can be a challenging time for both parents and children. Seeking support from family, friends, or professionals such as therapists or mediators can help parents navigate the challenges of co-parenting and reduce conflict.

By taking steps to reduce conflict and prioritize the well-being of their children, parents can help protect their children from the negative effects of separation and promote a healthy and positive co-parenting relationship.