



Co-parenting after separation

By Philippa Johnson

If you are divorcing or separating and you have children they will be your main concern – and both of you probably agree on that, whatever else you may disagree about. You may be worried about how your children are going to react when you tell them what is happening; you may be worried about the emotional trauma they will go through during a divorce process; you may be worried about how they are going to manage over the longer term with the realities of having two homes. Whatever your fears for your children, it will help to discuss them with each other – expressing your fears for the future is often the first step to lifting the pressure on your family and finding a way forward together.

All the research shows that the most damaging aspect of divorce and separation for children is conflict between their parents. The research suggests that children are much less concerned about the specifics of the arrangements made for them and much more concerned about having a relaxed, positive and loving relationship with both parents. This is your chance to show your child that separation and divorce doesn't have to mean a broken family – your child's family may look different afterwards but it is still a family, still a happy place to live and still an environment that your child can be proud to call home. This is also the chance to show them how to resolve differences with other people in a really positive way. Almost every aspect of your child's outlook on life will be shaped by the two of you – even if they don't seem to be paying attention to what you say they will definitely be paying attention to what you do and how you do it!

Having parents who are separated will probably make life a bit more difficult for your child, at least at first. The more you can work together, the less difficult it will be for them to adjust and to settle into a new way of being a family.

Here are some suggestions about how you can work together as co-parents to help give your child the best possible foundation for life as a happy and well-adjusted adult:

Communicate directly with each other and when you do:

Don't make assumptions, ask genuine questions to find things out; if something is wrong avoid accusations, as these are unlikely to improve the situation; try not to take things personally, but bear in mind that what you say may be taken personally; keep the focus on your child and don't refer to any of your relationship problems; use positive clear language; never use the children as messengers; briefly acknowledge texts and emails as quickly as possible, as a sign of respect, but don't reply until you have had time to think things through calmly

Operate as a team

When a problem comes up try to work out with your co-parent how to approach it; ask each other for and provide each other with help whenever possible; set clear boundaries together and try to be tolerant of the differences between you; if you disagree don't do so in front of your child

Prioritise your children

Ask yourself if the issue really matters to your child and, if it does, ask yourself if it will still matter in a week, a month or a year; weigh in the balance the impact of any conflict about this issue on your children; ask yourself if the issue would be resolved with some trust on both sides and also ask yourself whether your child will actually have a problem if things go as badly as you fear; ask yourself if you can offer a compromise on this issue in exchange for a compromise about something that you feel more strongly about; ask yourself every time whether your attitudes and behaviours are helping or making things worse for your child; never ask your children to keep secrets

Arrange for your child to spend as much quality time with both of you as possible

Make straightforward arrangements for your child which both of you and your child are clear about; encourage your child to look forward to their time with their other parent; don't ask your child to tell you about the other parent's home or new partner; respond positively when your child tells you something good about their time with the other parent

Respect yourself and your co-parent

Accept that while you can change yourself, you can't change your co-parent; accept that you are two separate individuals now, connected only through your child; give yourself space and time to deal with your own emotions without involving your child or your co-parent; don't waste your time focusing on what went wrong, focus instead on how you can improve things in the future; respond positively to suggestions your co-parent makes and think carefully about how to make them work; don't interfere with your child's relationship with your co-parent; concentrate on being happy rather than being right

Enjoy the time you have to yourself

Identify some things that you used to enjoy doing; identify some things you have always wanted to do and never had time for; if you do want to spend time getting through work or chores, make sure that you give yourself a treat as well and talk to the children about the treat; use the time to connect with your friends and family more

Never speak negatively about your co-parent

This applies if your children are in the same building and to all written communication – your child may hear you or see it even though you didn't want them to; even if your child is complaining about your co-parent make sure you stay positive; acknowledge that your personal relationship didn't work out in the end but never describe it as a mistake (which could suggest to your child that they are a mistake too); ideally you will even find something positive to say about your co-parent. Children need to love and respect both their parents; anything that makes that more difficult for them is likely to damage them in some way and anything that makes it easier for them to do that will make their lives easier.

Take time with your child – it is now more precious than ever

Focus on the child you are with as much as possible; when your child is with you they need to you to be every sort of parent (fun, caring, firm etc) and that takes effort; find things you can do together that make your child feel important and loved; give your child space to be sad sometimes - they need to know that everyone has to cope with sadness sometimes and that they have your support whenever they need it; giving your child time and attention is one of the best ways to help your child feel loved and cherished. Which is something that both of you want for them.

This is your chance to show your child that separation and divorce doesn't have to mean living in a broken family – your child's family may look different afterwards but it can still be a family, still a happy place to live and still a place that your child can be proud to call home.

