



Apart but together: Co-parenting after separation or divorce

Imagine you and your co-parent are trying to navigate the tricky, unpredictable waters of parenting after separation or divorce, all while ensuring your kids feel secure and loved. It's not an easy task – balancing your own emotions with the need to create a stable environment for your children. This is a pivotal time for your family, and it can feel confusing and unsettling. But with some helpful strategies, you can make this transition smoother for everyone. By focusing on what's best for your kids, developing your communication tactics, and sticking to consistent rules, you can work together more effectively. And if things get tough, don't hesitate to seek support. You don't have to go it alone.

Finding your feet through separation or divorce

Divorce and separation are often seen as a bad thing or a failure to 'make it work.' Add children into the mix, and it can feel even harder. You may be concerned that ending your relationship will negatively affect them. But the research shows us that divorce does not always have to be a negative event and it may be the best solution when there is frequent conflict between parents.¹

It is more helpful to see it as a transition into a happier way of living. What has been shown to help children is how parents and carers manage the transition through separation and divorce and their

co-parenting. Here are five practical tips to help you co-parent successfully.

Find a new way to communicate

Depending on the nature of your separation, you may or may not be able to communicate effectively with your co-parent. Try to keep communication focused on what will help your children feel secure and supported. Avoid discussing adult conflicts in front of your kids and aim to provide a stable and nurturing environment.

The quality of the communication is far more important than the frequency.

Effective communication helps to reduce misunderstandings and conflict, making it easier to work together in the best interest of your children.

Parenting after separation: putting children first

It may sound simple enough, but prioritising your children's needs and wellbeing above personal conflicts can be tough when going through a serious shift like separation or divorce. Ensure that decisions about parenting and daily routines are made with their best interests in mind. By putting your children's needs first, you and your co-partner can help them adjust more easily to the changes.

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Better understand common 'parent traps'

No two partnerships are the same and neither are their endings. However, there are some common difficulties that separating and divorcing parents can experience during this time. If you know what they are, you will be better at avoiding them.

A big one is to make sure parents stay mindful about maintaining their role as the parent at all times. Traps can include putting children in an adult role (parentification). This may look like a parent turning to children for either practical or emotional support that is inappropriate for their age, or, involving children in their disputes like using children as a messenger, pressuring them to take sides, or disclosing negative information about the other parent.

These parenting traps can negatively influence healthy child development after divorce.² It is important to keep children out of the adult role, both practically and emotionally.

Consistency is key

To help your kids feel secure and reduce confusion, it's helpful to have consistent rules and routines across both households.

Talk with your co-parent about things like bedtime, discipline, and screen time, and agree on guidelines that work for both of you. One great way to keep things consistent is to create a parenting plan that you both agree on.

Having a written document to refer to can make it easier to stay on the same page and ensure that everyone is following the same rules. This consistency

helps create a stable environment for your children as they adjust to the new family structure.

Reach out when you need support

Going through separation is tough – not just for your children, but for you too. If you're finding co-parenting challenging, or struggling more generally with all the changes, reach out for help.

Talking to a loved and trusted person is a great support. You can also find a therapist or counsellor for support and advice for separating parents, or enrol in a parenting program like Family Transitions Triple P Online.

Remember, asking for help is about taking care of yourself so you can be a loving and present parent. By getting the right support, you can navigate this difficult time more smoothly and make the co-parenting journey a bit easier for everyone.

¹ Ambros, T., Coltro, B. P., Vieira, M. L., & Lopes, F. M. (2022). Coparenting and child behavior in the context of divorce: A systematic review. *Psicologia: Teoria e prática*, 24(1), 1-23.

² Van Dijk, R., Van Der Valk, I. E., Deković, M., & Branje, S. (2020). A meta-analysis on interparental conflict, parenting, and child adjustment in divorced families: Examining mediation using meta-analytic structural equation models. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 79, 101861.