

## **COUNSELLOR'S REPORT: CHILDREN AND SEPARATION**

When parents separate, children generally experience many of the same feelings as the adults, although children may also be unsure of what is happening. Children, like their parents, may feel grief, shock and confusion. They are likely to feel insecure and may worry whether the remaining parent will leave them as well. Some may feel that they are to blame for the situation, while others may feel angry.

### **How Can You Help?**

- Both parents together should tell the children about the separation, if possible, before it occurs. Tell them they will still see the parent who is leaving the home if this is the case.
- Give the children an explanation of why you are separating, at a level they can understand. Try to keep this simple, direct and avoid blame – an example of this may be, “*We have not been happy together for a long time and because of this, we think it is best for us to live in separate places*”. Let the children know that you are not separating because of anything they have said or done (as children often see themselves as the cause of the events surrounding them). Answer any questions as honestly as you can.
- Let your children know that both parents will still love them and this will always be the case. This will help to reassure them that it isn't because of them that Dad or Mum is going to live elsewhere.
- Keep the children out of your arguments and try to avoid conflict in front of them.
- When possible, try to minimise changes in the children's environment. If the children have had to move to a new house or school, maintaining the usual household routines will help children feel more secure.
- Acknowledge their feelings of sadness, anger or anxiety and help them to express these through talk or play.
- Children will often respond to emotional upsets by regressing to behaviour they have already grown out of. For instance a three-year-old may want to act like a baby at times, and a five-year-old may return to bed-wetting at night. These are normal responses that help the child to cope, and it is best for parents to accept the child as they are, for they will catch up with their previous level again when they are ready. However, if this persists over a longer period of time, it may be appropriate to see a counsellor.
- Be positive about the other parent when talking to your child; regardless of how you really feel. Giving a bad message about the other parents only makes children feel worse about themselves.
- Although separating is unhappy and distressing, try to show the children that although it's not easy at the moment, you are handling it and expect things to improve. Children need to feel that no matter how bad everyone feels, the parent in charge is able to cope and carry on.
- If possible, try to reach an agreement with your ex-partner about rules and discipline, as it is best for children if these are not vastly different between households.
- After access children may sometimes return home irritable, withdrawn or behaving differently. The fact that children are upset after spending time with the other parent does not necessarily mean that they have had a bad time or have been neglected. Seeing the other parent may bring up feelings of sadness from missing that person or the wish that parents will re-unite. So while access is enjoyable itself, it can serve as a painful reminder that these hopes will be unfulfilled.
- The Family Court Counselling Services or counsellors from other agencies such as Centacare, Unifam, Relationships Australia, Family Life, Stepping Stones (Dulwich Hill) or your local Community Health Centre can assist with dealing with the trauma of separation. Relationships Australia can also offer a 'Parenting Plan', which can assist parents to make decisions and negotiate agreements about access and custody when separating.

**Parentline – 132 055 – 9:30 – 4:30 – Monday – Saturday**