

Tuesday, May 16, 2017

Stronger families: How to maintain the family unit after parental separation

In Australia almost half of all divorces involve children (47.5% in 2015, Australian Bureau of Statistics). For the sake of their kids, even when separated, parents need to have a functional relationship that allows them to communicate about their children's needs without further exposing their children to conflict. As children have little control over their environment, it is their parents' responsibility to ensure that environment is as stable and functional as possible.

However, it can be hard for parents who are caught up in a difficult separation to be the parents they want to be for their children. Often their own hurt and pain takes control and prevents them from seeing the hurt their children are experiencing.

Studies have shown that children who are exposed to destructive parental conflict are at risk of developing emotional or behavioural difficulties, including poor interpersonal skills, which can affect relationships with their family, teachers, peers and later on, romantic partners (Grych et al., 2003; Cummings et al., 2006). Parental conflict also has an impact on children's cognitive abilities and attention, which can cause them to have difficulties at school (Harold et al., 2007).

So how exactly can co-parents create a strong family unit for their kids, when the rest of their relationship has fallen apart? Those of us working with families experiencing separation are able to help them to focus on their children throughout their journey, with the following advice from Interrelate's Parents Not Partners program.

Find time for self-care

It's important for parents to understand the importance of self-care. If their grief and anger towards the other parent is consuming them then they are likely to be 'running on empty' and have very little left in their tank to focus on parenting. Self-care may include reading a book, working out, having a cup of tea, listening to music, going fishing etc without guilt. Know that it's ok to set aside time for themselves (as long as this doesn't mean neglecting their responsibilities).

Emotional regulation

It's normal to feel frustrated, hurt and angry during a separation and at times these emotions will flare up and become overwhelming. Emotions affect how we react to triggers and so by learning to regulate your emotions, parents can create a greater sense of calm for themselves and the situation their children live in. Regular exercise, breathing techniques and imagery exercises can all be used to bring their thinking into the present, as opposed to dwelling on the past or worrying about the future. This will allow them to be emotionally present when they are with their children.

Acknowledge their feelings

Even though they may not want to hear about or see the other parent, children need to know that it is ok for them to love both so they don't feel trapped in the middle. Parents should support them to have pictures, reminders and keepsakes of the other parent and the past.

Separate partner issues from parent issues

It's important for children to know that their parents support them having time with the other parent, and don't interrogate them about spending time together. Even if they disagree with the other parent's way of parenting, they should be careful of letting their children know this otherwise they may undermine their own parenting, as the children will play the two of them off against each other to get what they want. If they need to have a conversation with the other parent around different views on parenting or other issues, arrange to have the conversation when the children are at school, day care or when they are not around. It's important to create a business-like relationship, as it is about investing in their children's future and needs.

Show respect for the other parent

Children need their parents/carers to be examples of respectful relationships, which means parents need to show respect for each other – even if they're not together. The other parent is as important to the child as they are and any disrespect of the other parent is like a knife in their child's heart. Remember that children learn what they see others do, so if one parent disrespects the other parent, chances are their children will be disrespectful to them and others.

What if they can't find a way to get along on their own?

We know that separation is never easy, but we also know that children do much better when conflict between parents is minimised and they have secure and stable arrangements in place for their care and contact with both parents. If a parent is struggling with balancing their emotions over the separation, you should recommend they seek the help of a mediator or counsellor who can help them through the situation and consider suggesting a post-separation parenting program.

Suggest attending a program

Interrelate runs a Parents Not Partners program across NSW to improve emotional and developmental outcomes for children in separated families. This unique and cutting edge program provides parents with knowledge, tips and strategies to be able to focus on their children rather than on their conflicts with the other parent. Participants in the program reported that after taking the program they were “more mindful of the impact on the children; more patient with their frustrations.”

To find out more about Interrelate's other programs for separated parents, call 1300 i relate (1300 473 528).

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