

Supporting families as they manage separation and divorce

1 in 2

IN AUSTRALIA NEARLY ONE IN TWO MARRIAGES END IN SEPARATION AND DIVORCE. This directly impacts many children in our schools and adults in our workplaces, parishes and social networks, and quite possibly our own family too. Coping with the family changes that result can be challenging for children and their parents, and for those supporting the family including relatives, friends, work colleagues and school staff. Some knowledge and understanding of what children and young people are dealing with can help us to provide the right kinds of support, when and where it is needed.



Reactions of children and young people

CHILDREN'S REACTIONS TO SEPARATION AND DIVORCE ARE UNIQUE AND VARIED.

They depend on the child's age, personality, previous experiences, support networks, and on how well their parents are managing. Some thoughts about how some preschool, primary and secondary aged young people may react are shared below as a general guide only. Supportive people who can pay attention and notice how children are managing change are critical in helping young people to adapt to new situations.

Children in the primary school years may ...

- understand more about what separation and divorce means in their family
- hold unrealistic fears about the future that seem real to the child
- blame themselves for family changes
- experience physical symptoms including feeling sick, headaches, tiredness
- show feelings in a range of ways – from being 'over' co-operative and agreeable to being angry and lashing out

Young people in the secondary school years may ...

- feel a sense of loss similar to those of other adults involved and in their extended family
- experience the changes in their family as unique, and so feel different and alone
- worry about family finances
- be unwilling to be a part of family arrangements that they feel don't suit them
- feel angry, anxious, sad and overwhelmed
- engage in risky behaviours as a way of dealing with their feelings about the changes

What can children and young people do for themselves?

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE ARE OFTEN CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE WHEN THE FAMILY CHANGES.

There are things they can be encouraged to do that may help:

- read (appropriate) picture books and novels to understand they are not alone and that other children are dealing with similar issues
- talk to their parents about how they are feeling
- talk to other interested and supportive adults and peers about how they are feeling
- visit child-focused websites for age-appropriate information about separation and divorce – this can help allay fears and provide facts and ideas on coping.

(The Kids Helpline website has a useful page supporting children in this area: www.kidshelpline.com.au/teens/issues/when-parents-separate-or-divorce)

How can parents help?

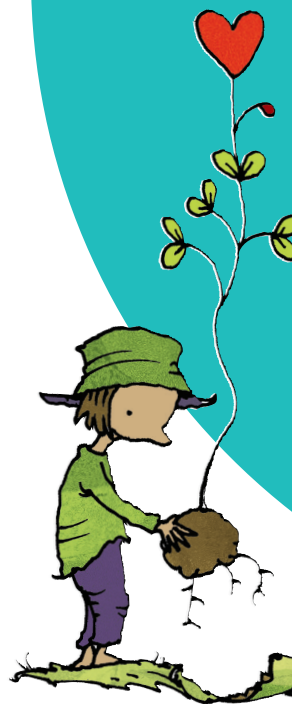
PARENTS MAY BE JUST COPING WITH THE CHANGES AND LOSSES THAT COME WITH SEPARATION AND DIVORCE, AND CAN FEEL OVERWHELMED IN SUPPORTING THEIR CHILDREN 'THE RIGHT WAY'.

One of the best things parents can do is look after themselves – parent wellbeing is key to children coping well.

Parents can also help by:

- finding time, space and attention to spend talking and listening with their child
- letting children and young people have a say in decision making
- managing home routines that are constant, warm and reassuring
- ensuring children are eating well, sleeping enough and getting some exercise
- letting school know what is going on so that other adults can support their child
- accepting help from others (whether to mind the children for some parent time out, someone to have a laugh or a cry with, or a trusted adult for children to turn to).

“... parent wellbeing is key to children coping well ...”



How can other adults help?

THERE ARE OFTEN MANY ADULT CARE-GIVERS IN A CHILD'S LIFE, INCLUDING, RELATIVES, FRIENDS AND TEACHERS.

Each can play a role in supporting children and young people as they manage family change.

Suggestions include:

- provide security and support to children and young people
- help children and young people feel competent and in control
- maintain expectations and consistent discipline
- keep lines of communication open
- respond appropriately, with understanding, if behaviour issues arise.

How can schools help?

Schools can help by recognising that all families have strengths and working with these strengths in supporting children and young people. School staff can also aim to maintain communication with both parents in a range of ways, and provide additional information and referral options for children and young people who need some more support.