

When Parents Separate: Getting it Right for the Children

A guide for parents



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Introduction

If you are a parent, and are reading this, it's likely that you are doing so because you want to do all that you can to support your children's emotional wellbeing and minimise the potential upset that can sometimes be caused for children by their parents' separation or divorce.

To help you think about these issues Tavistock Relationships has put together this short guide which deals with some of the feelings children experience when their parents' relationship becomes conflicted or breaks down.

It is not so much a 'How to' guide, but more a 'What to avoid and why' one to help you and your children negotiate one of life's most difficult transitions and avoid as much as possible causing pain and hurt to your children.

Some people believe that it is almost impossible to help parents in conflict develop a way of collaborative parenting together. This is not our experience. We find most parents feel that, despite the anger, loss and hurt that can follow the breakdown of their relationship, they still want to do their best for their children. Like them, you are likely to be reading this because you are intent on shielding your children as much as possible from the painful effects of the ending of the parental relationship and the surrounding conflict. And this is something that you cannot avoid addressing. As the American psychologist and expert on divorce and mediation, Professor Robert Emery, puts it:

“When you have children [...] the game of divorce is different and so are the rules. [...] You will not have the opportunities to indulge your grief or anger that partners without children have. You cannot refuse to see or talk to your ex for a week, a month, a year, forever. You cannot change your phone number, leave town or pretend the marriage never happened. Whether you are the leaver or the left, emotionally on your feet or under the table, as long as someone calls you Mom or Dad, you are on duty.”

Emery, Robert (2006). *The Truth About Children and Divorce: Dealing With the Emotions So You and Your Children Can Thrive* (p.43)

Our work at Tavistock Relationships with parents in conflict is always done from a child-centred perspective, helping parents to understand how children might be feeling, how they might experience particular situations, particularly ongoing conflict.

A large part of the work is about helping parents make parenting decisions collaboratively, or jointly, in the best interest of their children. But the work is not just about the children's feelings. We also know that it helps if each parent begins to learn about their former partner's separate experience, their current

perspective and feelings, as this greater understanding can result in increased empathy and a greater ability to co-operate over parenting together after separation.

We know it is not easy. We understand that after the break-up of a relationship feelings often run high and any collaborative or joint work with your ex-partner can seem impossible. However, it is our experience that these painful feelings lessen in time and the effort required is a worthwhile investment in your children's future happiness.

Why is it important to understand feelings?

There is now a wealth of accumulated research that suggests that what parents do after family break-up – including how they parent, handle their emotions, relate to each other and work together – is a key factor in helping children recover from the shock of their parents' separation.

Many parents are concerned about how parental separation impacts on their children and their future development and emotional health. There is no denying that children are likely to be hurt and upset by the break-up of their parents' relationship. But this is not the end of their story. Children are also highly resilient.

It is not whether their parents are together or separated that matters most when looking after children's emotional wellbeing. Instead, it is the quality of parent-child relationship and the conflict between parents (separated or together) that is vital.

Children who are caught up in the conflict between their parents sometimes display a number of worrying behaviours. They may become angry, volatile, difficult – or they may become 'model children', putting their childhood on hold to look after the needs of their distressed parents.

Many parents believe that they are able to shield their children from not only the effect of arguments between mum and dad*, but even from the very awareness of it. This can be difficult for parents to hear, but there is a strong chance that they are mistaken about this.

In our experience children are acutely aware of the 'emotional temperature' between parents. They don't have to witness a screaming row to understand that there is something really painful going on. They understand cold war – that is, a long-standing frostiness or silent hostility

between parents – as well as bloody battles. The questions which parents ideally need to be asking themselves include: Can you put your children ahead of your own upset or angry feelings? Can you do your best to ensure that your children come first and are not caught in the middle?

Parents understandably struggle and are vulnerable at a time of relationship loss but this is exactly the time when your children need you more, not less. It may take you and your partner a year or two to renegotiate a new, post-separation relationship but it is hard for the children to wait that long.

We know that, sadly, children can be at risk when parents fail to manage their own painful feelings over the loss of the relationship. We also know that it is not easy. The feelings stirred up by separation can be so intense that even the most level-headed parents can be caught by surprise. Recognising this can be the first step in the often long process of building a new coparenting relationship with your former partner.

The breakdown of a relationship can be an immensely upsetting event for both partners. Their children, who are already struggling with their own feelings of loss, worry and hurt, rarely remain unaffected by their parents' distress. Feelings of anger about an ex-partner, and of hurt about their own circumstances, can be very powerful long after the actual divorce or separation and such overwhelming emotions can affect a parent's ability to think about the children and their feelings.

*or mum and mum, or dad and dad, as applicable

How feelings can spill over to spoil the parent-child relationship

A traumatic separation leaves behind an atmosphere of blame and mistrust; often partners can end up feeling that their ex-spouse – their child's co-parent – is to blame. This can be very confusing for children.

When parents hold highly negative views of each other, this can provide a confusing and contradictory family environment

for their children. As mentioned above, there is plenty of research that shows that ongoing tension or arguments between you and your ex-partner gets in the way of effective co-parenting. In the following paragraphs we would like to show you some of the more common ways this can happen.



How emotional pain can make parenting harder

Parents who feel that they were wronged or hurt by the separation can sometimes develop fixed beliefs about their ex-partner which colour their perception of the way their former partners are parenting the children.

In other words, when you regard your ex-partner as 'bad, dangerous and irresponsible', you might feel that this is how they will also behave and parent the children, too. If they treated you so badly, isn't there a danger, you might think, of them treating the children badly, too?

For example, a mother who feels that her former husband was emotionally cold and uncaring towards her within the marriage, might fear for the children becoming neglected and uncared for during the times they spend with their father.

Equally, a father who felt his wife to be full of anger and upset when they were still together might become worried that his ex-partner is equally angry and upset towards the children. And once parents start looking out for these things happening, the likelihood is they will indeed find evidence of what they are looking for.

This way the more positive aspects of co-parenting can become overlooked. Their ex-partner's different, but equally valid and caring parenting style might go unnoticed. It can be tempting upon the child's return home from a contact visit to listen out for things that were difficult or didn't go so well as 'evidence' of the anxieties and fears they already hold based on their own experience of their former partner.

Children are very sensitively attuned to their parents' expressed and unexpressed wishes and they will pick up on these unspoken expectations. They want and need their parents' love and approval so they might start saying more of the things their parents are particularly ready to hear and speak less of the good times or of their own, personal experience of their other parent. And so the cycle begins.

When parents are badly hurt or wounded by their ex-partner and by the ensuing separation, they can be so full of difficult feelings themselves that their children's unique experience can get lost. When parents view their ex-partner as 'evil', 'horrible' or 'all-bad', they can sometimes come to believe that their children must feel the same way. It is one of the most important tasks of co-parenting to be able to find a way to distinguish your feelings towards your co-parent from those of your children's feelings towards their mum and dad.

Adult conflict: children's responses

Children really do want to keep their parents happy and often show or speak more about those feelings that their parents are happier to hear. If they know that mum is likely to feel wretched about dad's new computer, it is unlikely that they feel free to talk about how cool they believe the new gadget is. What kid wants to feel responsible for more tears?

In some cases parents themselves are responsible for cases of 'selective hearing' – it is not uncommon to work with co-parents in conflict who describe to us two different sets of children – children who 'miraculously' fit in with mum or dad's preferences. Dad sometimes talks about little girls who positively relish flexibility, whilst mum is convinced that the same little girls are craving set routines. In such cases we suspect that the parents – although listening hard – are only hearing parts of what is being said to them by their kids – those parts that can be used as ammunition in the ongoing war with the other parent.

Children caught in the middle do their best to try and accommodate both of their parents, including their different expectations. They can become good at all this juggling, but there is a danger that they – the most important people in this – can get lost in the process.

Children need to be able to find out for themselves what they feel, think, like and dislike – but if their childhood is spent vigilantly watching and second guessing their parents' conflicting opinions, their job of growing into a secure and self-aware adult is just that much more difficult.

When children's own views of their parent don't tie in with their other parent's view of them, and when children's own experience and feelings are not clearly heard or validated, this can seriously distort their emerging sense of the world around them. They learn not to trust their own thoughts and feelings or even, in some cases, to even cut off their feelings as they see how they are upsetting to their parents.

There is a further potential conflict when children think they have to choose between feeling accepted and validated by their parents or forming their own, separate views and set of feelings. Children hunger for their parents' acceptance and are willing to go to great lengths to gain this – but they can pay a high price in psychological development and emotional wellbeing. Sometimes children find it difficult to be aware what they feel in this bind.



What matters for children?

Many of the difficulties we are describing may have already been felt by parents and children alike when the family still lived together, and it can feel very disappointing to notice that divorce and separation not only failed to help with these feelings but, in some cases, could have made it even harder for the children.

In general, the more bitter and long-running the conflict between you and your ex-partner, the more difficult it is for the children to draw on their natural strengths to find healthy ways to cope. However, a lot can be done to help when parents make sure to look at what's happening from the children's point of view. But what do children worry about most in these situations?

We know that children are preoccupied by some questions when their parents are at war:

- **What is true and what is not?**
- **What is safe and what is not?**
- **Who is to blame for all this conflict?**
- **Am I like the 'good parent' or the 'bad parent'?**

Let's look at each of these worries in turn:

What is true and what is not?

Although often this is not something parents are aware of, children of all ages spend a lot of their time and mental energy trying to figure out their parents' conflicting claims. Some of the possibilities, from the child's point of view, are quite alarming.

Children also tend to use their parents as a 'guide to life' and general reference point when growing up. But it is very difficult to figure out who is safe or who to trust, and what to think when parents are locked into cold war, a standoff or full conflict.

This state of affairs can make children end up vigilant and mistrustful of others, finding it hard to generally trust the safety of relationships even with their friends. If their parents find it difficult to co-operate, children might grow up expecting the world to be an uncooperative place.

They might even stop turning to adults for support and guidance, trying instead to puzzle out things for themselves. Unfortunately this can be an extremely difficult thing for children to do to, particularly, as we have described above, if they have already learnt to mistrust their own thoughts and views on reality.

What is safe and what is not?

Children instinctively tune in to their parents' emotional state and understand when their parents are upset, hurt, angry or are finding it difficult to cope. They try to do something about this in their own limited way, wondering, for example: 'Will mummy be lonely and cry if I spend time with daddy and leave her on her own whilst I go and enjoy myself?' or 'If dad is so cross with mum, will he be angry with me, too, when I come back from spending the weekend with my mum and her new partner?'

We adults naturally know that the answer to these questions more often than not is 'No', but this does not keep children from worrying, particularly if their parents' behaviour contradicts their words of reassurance. When children are worried and cautious, this makes it harder for them to lose themselves in play or have care-free fun; it also makes it harder for them to grow into trusting, happy adults.

Who is to blame?

Parents often fight bitterly with each other and, after separation, the topics of their fights or disagreements are frequently about the children or arrangements around them, such as contact, access or sharing holidays.

It is no surprise that children, since their parents fight so much about them, can end up feeling responsible for these fights and the resulting upset. This, of course, is not true but it can give children a disproportionate and premature sense of responsibility, one that they are not ready for. They sometimes believe it is all their fault. They might even think it is down to them to make things right. No wonder they sometimes end up feeling a confusing mixture of importance and helplessness.

Am I like the 'good parent' or the 'bad parent'?

Children can have an idea that they resemble one or both of their parents. If their parents continuously blame or undermine the other parent or indicate, openly or subtly, that the other parent is 'bad' (mean, hysterical, jealous, unloving, aggressive, controlling... the list is endless), children find themselves in a real muddle. 'Who is the good and who is the bad parent? When I misbehave or get something wrong or mess up, is it because I am like the 'bad parent'? Is there a good and a bad part inside me, too? Is part of me unacceptable or wrong?'

Sometimes children respond to this dilemma by trying to be impossibly good, not allowing themselves the smallest mistake and striving to maintain impossibly high standards. They might end up believing that the world is fundamentally split between good and bad people. This is a far cry from the healthy developmental process of coming to terms with, and getting to know, the world around us in all its complexity.

Why does conflict sometimes continue long after the separation?

As already mentioned, separation and relationship breakdown can make parents feel extremely upset and vulnerable.

When we feel emotionally vulnerable, we try our very best to make ourselves feel stronger, harder, better equipped to cope. One of the ways to avoid the feelings around vulnerability and sadness is to hang on to the feeling of being right. It is, of course, even easier to feel right if parents believe that their children feel the same way about the other parent as they do. This can lead to parents'

'selective hearing' – only picking up on their children's communications when they happen to correspond with their own views. This, and the way it might affect children's development, is something we have touched on earlier in this guide.

But there are other possible reasons behind ongoing, bitter, never-ending conflict. When you get to reading this, you might wonder why this needs to be stated at all. You have ended the relationship after all; you are now divorced or separated.



Anger shields us from feeling the sadness

There are many ways of continuing with a relationship. On an emotional, psychological level, long after the ink has dried on the divorce settlement and the last box of CDs was moved out of the formerly joint home, some former partners remain connected.

Strange as it might seem, explosive, painful and ongoing conflict is often a way to hang on to some sort of relationship. A relationship of love and respect that has become a relationship of anger and distrust is still a relationship. High conflict between co-parents can be a sign that true psychological separation for one or both of the partners has not really happened. A passionate, although negative connection is often maintained through conflict and this is the very conflict that can, in turn, be so damaging to the children.

When a relationship ends, one of the main tasks is to achieve true psychological separation. Interestingly, when the focus is on achieving a practical separation, a division of property, possessions and most importantly contact time with children, the real separation sometimes continues to be avoided. The necessary and unavoidable pain and grieving process is replaced by anger – and the relationship lives on in bitterness.

Without children a separated couple would be free to never see each other again. But because of their children, there can never really be a clean break. A distinctly new, coparenting relationship needs to be established, but in order for that to happen, the old, failed couple relationship has to be let go of.

Separation is more than deciding not to live together. Forming a new, collaborative coparenting relationship requires a lot of emotional work and a high degree of awareness of both oneself and the other person. If this is avoided and emotional separation is not completed, a pre-

occupation with an ex-partner, the other half of the co-parenting relationship, can make life very difficult for the children in the middle.

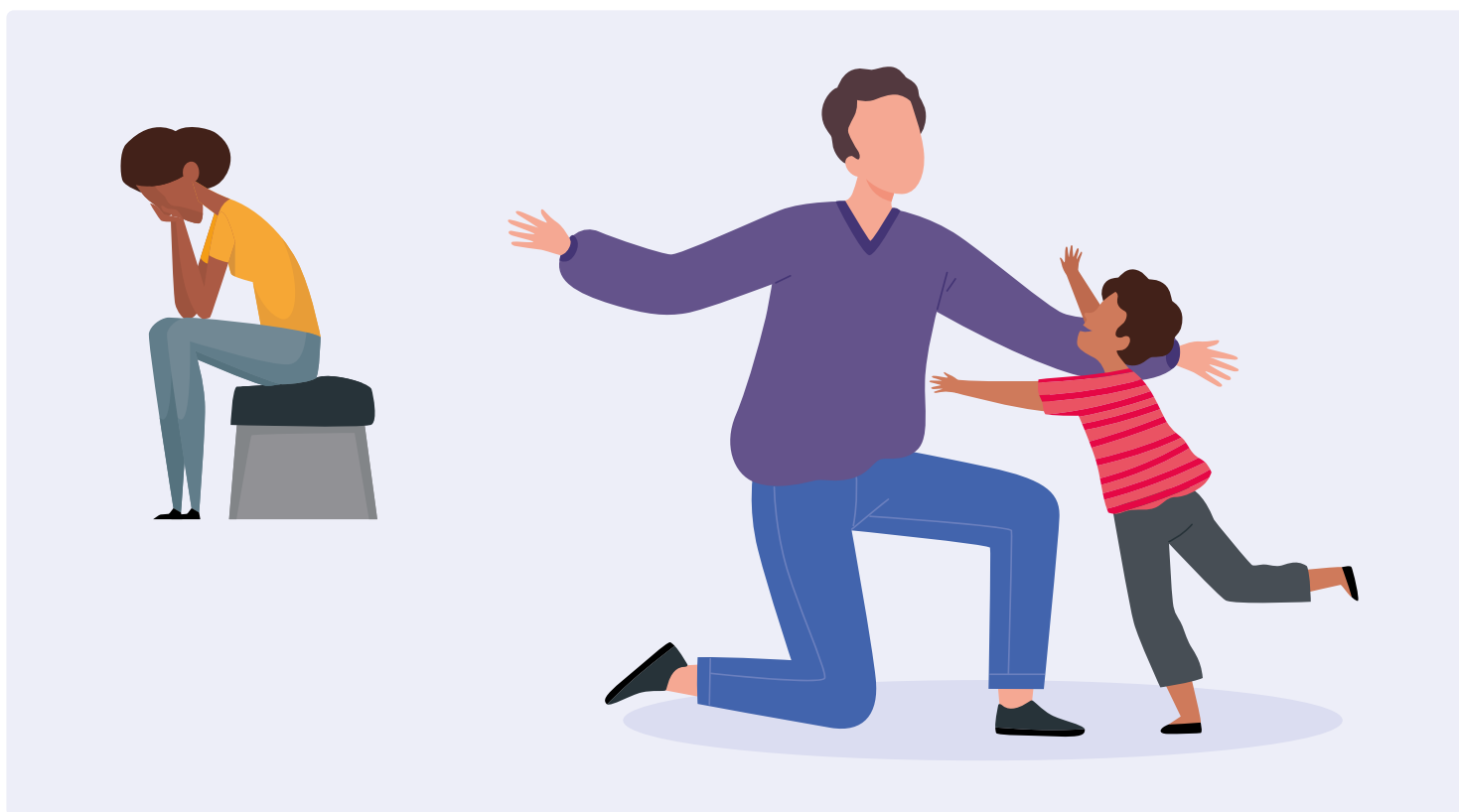
Sometimes it might help to remember that an ex-partner's seemingly difficult, angry behaviour is a way for them to show their pain and frustration over the separation, over the loss of their partner and their daily contact with their children. But no matter how painful or upsetting the situation is, it is important to try and limit the amount of frustration shown in front of the children.

No matter how hard it is, parents should try their best to maintain a stance of neutrality. Those parents who have not yet managed to fully grieve for the ending of the relationship are the ones who are most likely to find themselves locked in an ongoing conflict, typically over parenting. The continuing anger former partners still feel about each other can be a sign of a couple that is still very involved. They are still in a relationship, albeit in a negative one.

The true opposite of love is not hate but benign indifference, or the ability to establish a cordial, collaborative, secure yet flexible co-parenting relationship. The emotional work of grieving for the lost relationship cannot be avoided. Without this a new, collaborative co-parenting relationship cannot be achieved. Part of this process is – as we have already signalled above – for both partners to make every effort to try to understand what each of the parties affected by the break-up might be feeling.

Of course, this is an often lengthy and always painful process, but once parents manage to separate psychologically, they are in a much better position to embark on an entirely new relationship with each other – a lifelong one, i.e. their co-parenting relationship.

How to spot incomplete separation or unresolved loss



If you find that you are still hugely upset by every little thing that your co-parent does or doesn't do, there is a good chance that you have not completely grieved for the lost relationship and continue to remain emotionally connected. This makes it a lot more difficult to separate the children's relationship to their other parent from your relationship to him or her, and a lot harder to see the difference between how the kids feel about mum or dad and how you feel about your former partner.

If you are a parent caught up in such a painful, high-conflict situation, you probably recognise some of the above description. But there is a good chance that you find your own role in maintaining this situation harder to notice. We often find that in such situations both parents are adamant that the other partner is the problem and things could improve hugely if only their co-parent would stop being so difficult.

Often the hardest task of working towards collaborative parenting is for parents to recognize how they are each contributing to the problem and to take responsibility for trying to do things differently. But it might be helpful to remember that children need all their parents' love and energy and it is painful for them if so much of their parents' attention is taken up with fighting each other.

Parents often believe that they are, in fact, fighting their ex because it is in the children's best interest. But this can be far from the case – children are growing up fast and the ongoing hostility between parents erodes their rapidly disappearing childhood.

When parents can think about what their ex-partner might be feeling, we find that communication about the children and around parenting becomes much easier or, at the very least, possible.

Be prepared to parent differently

Practical and psychological separation brings about changes in how you see yourself as a parent. Although ending an unhappy relationship can come as a bit of a relief, it is often not recognised that parenting alone is different and often even harder than parenting with a partner. Your idea of yourself as a parent might need to adjust to the new realities of co-parenting after separation. You might have to learn new skills: learning to take charge of discipline or learning to be playful with your children; learning to let go of your children for large chunks of time or learning to entertain them on your own.

The way you parent is only one of the long series of changes resulting from family break-up. They are too numerous to list here and are unique to every family. Some of the changes are practical. Finances are likely to become more stretched, living arrangements most likely need to be altered. One of the biggest changes will come around celebrating your children's special days, birthdays, religious holidays and other festive events. All these occasions now require a lot of careful planning and inevitably carry an element of loss.

Handover horrors

Many separated parents notice that handover times can be particularly difficult for their children – or rather, that children might become particularly challenging when they are transferred from one parent's care into the other's.

Children often play up when they are picked up or dropped off by one or the other of their parents. Some parents are tempted to interpret this as a sign that their son or daughter would prefer not to see the other parent. This is rarely the case. Child experts sometimes call this 'transitional anxiety' and it can cover a whole range of challenging behaviours. Children might become quiet, withdrawn, aggressive, tearful or overexcited in anticipation of seeing the other parent. Or they may behave in other difficult ways when they return home from time spent with their non-residential parent.

In fact, difficult behaviour at handover times is a well-recognised issue. Handover times can be difficult and confusing times for children, particularly if they also come with a large dose of parental conflict. Children almost certainly miss the other parent and also take some time to adjust to the different environment. Getting angry with your co-parent for bringing the children back crabby or for not making sure that they are happily waiting to be picked up to go is certainly not helpful and is likely to make the children feel even more upset and confused. Talking to them about how the situation is hard for them and allowing them to feel and express their more difficult feelings can be helpful – but do not expect immediate change.

Research suggests that it takes several months for children to adjust to a new routine, a new situation.

What your children need from you

Although, as we said at the beginning of this booklet, this is not a 'How to' guide, there are a few general ideas that you might find helpful when thinking about your children's needs. Your children need to know that they continue to be loved by both their parents and one of the best ways of assuring them of this is by being extremely reliable when so much else around them is changing.

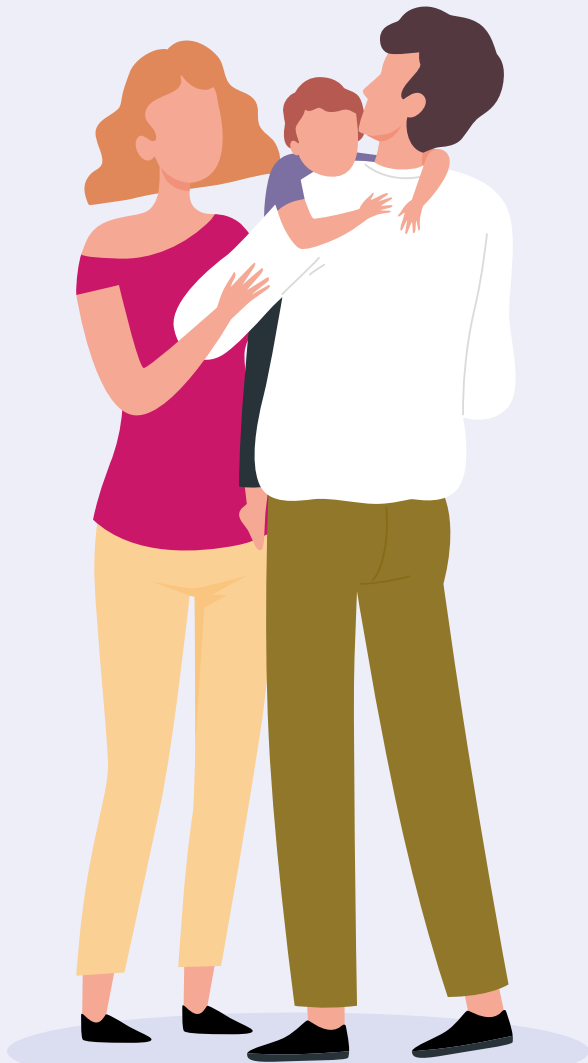
It really helps them to know that you are putting them first in actions as well as in words. This might also mean keeping to schedules and arrangements, picking them up and returning them home at the exact time – consistency helps children feel secure and loved. It reminds them that even though there is a physical distance, they are still held in mind and thought about by the other parent.

If you remain mindful of your children's changing needs and priorities, you are most likely be on the right track. This is hardly ever as simple as it sounds, particularly if there is a fight going on between parents over the amount of time they both want to spend with their children.

Responding to the children's changing needs, their need to stay in touch with friends, to attend parties, sleepovers or camping trips away, means that both parents will have to let go of some of their own needs of spending time with them. This might be painful but it is worth remembering that it is not the children's job to fulfil their parents' needs.



Conflict reduction: your most important task



The thread that binds all these ideas together is your central challenge as a separated parent. It really is important to try and keep conflict, particularly conflict around the children, to a minimum. It is also important to try and keep your children's perspective in mind as much as possible, even when you are upset and hurt.

We know that this is one of the hardest things to do at a time when you yourself are struggling with overwhelmingly painful emotions and trying to come to terms with the loss of the relationship. We understand that when feelings run high, it is really difficult to carry on thinking – thinking about the children, thinking about their feelings and yours and about the words and actions that result from these feelings.

We believe that it is vitally important to create some space for thinking, precisely because these feelings are at times so powerful that they threaten to drown out everything else, including the ability to think about what is happening from the child's perspective. Creating a safe space to think about feelings and actions between parents in conflict is one of the principal aims of our work at Tavistock Relationships.

Moving on: The benefits of a more collaborative relationship with your ex-partner

Whilst we hope that you found some of the ideas in this booklet helpful, we know that it can take more than reading a brief guide to get things moving in the right direction. Parenting together after family break-up is one of the hardest things you will ever have to do.

Finding a way forward isn't easy but we believe that your hard work and determination can bring enormous rewards. Conflict can sap your energies and stop you moving forward with your life. Seeing your children struggle and worrying about them not reaching their full potential can be immensely upsetting and it is hard to really enjoy life in this situation.

Our experience shows that when parents find a way to collaborate and relax into co-parenting after separation, children pick up on this change. When children find their lives less worrying and relax, parents can also begin to relax. Seeing your children thrive, knowing that you are doing your best for them by reducing conflict to a minimum can be hugely rewarding.

As well as security and structure, children also need flexibility. Flexibility to respond not only to the children's changing needs as they grow and mature, but also to various life events, large and small alike. Co-parents need to find a way to provide a structure that accommodates their children's changing needs. What might have worked well for a preschool child will be unsuitable to teenagers eager to go out and explore the world. As children grow, so must the co-parenting arrangements grow and adapt with them. In this respect, parenting apart is not all that different from any form of parenting.

Many parents have told us after they finish working with us how life has improved for them. These changes are sometimes difficult to put into words but feelings speak for themselves. As parents find a way to begin to talk and work things out, the improvements in atmosphere and general emotional well-being of children and parents can be considerable.



Tavistock Relationships has been helping individuals, couples and families since 1948, and now provides more than 20,000 therapy sessions to individuals and couples every year, online and in person.

It is a leading authority on couple psychotherapy, undertaking research, providing training and delivering programmes to support couples and families experiencing relationship difficulties.

The charity researches, develops, pilots and raises awareness of best practice, providing services to couples and families, and disseminates its learning through academic and policy activities.

Our training programmes in couple and sex therapy range from introductory up to clinical qualification level and are accredited by bodies including The British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy and The British Psychoanalytic Council. We also train NHS practitioners in the NICE-recommended talking therapy Couple Therapy for Depression.

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