

EFFECT ON CHILDREN OF PARENTAL SEPARATION, AT DIFFERENT AGES

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Children react differently to parental separation and divorce, in part dependant on their age as well as their maturity. All research shows that the joint and common conciliatory approach of parents to helping their children through this period will minimise the adverse impact and shorten the transition from living with two parents to living separately with each parent.

Many parents assume that because a child is showing different behaviour and attitudes especially what would otherwise be inappropriate for a child of that age and including when around times of handover of contact, the child does not want to live with or see the other parent. More often, the child is showing stress at what is a new, bewildering and unhappy situation. This stress may not have existed, or at least have shown itself, before the separation. It can be reduced by parents minimising the tensions of contact handovers and giving the child permission to enjoy the time spent with the other parent.

It is important for both parents to understand the way their child may “normally” react at such times, and that such reactions are not necessarily the cause for blame or recrimination against the other parent. Accordingly I set out some “normal” reactions and behaviours of children of different age groups. A child will not show all of these and if you are uncertain, take professional advice.

Age 2 - 4

Children in this age group are starting to explore social relationships, such as sharing with others, taking turns, being part of a wider group than just the narrow family unit. They are often egocentric and believe that others behave and feel in the way they do. They also believe they cause the actions of others. In very young children, memory span is limited and not seeing significant adults for lengths of time may stretch their abilities to recall or maintain attachments. Equally, they do not attach importance to lengths of time spent in the company of either parent. They may be very sensitive to moods and emotions and be confused by “messages” relayed by parents in conflict.

Age 4 - 7

This age group has an emerging ability to see another’s viewpoint. They can start to see in a basic fashion one parent’s perspective on matters but not both simultaneously. Accordingly, they are not able to sift and balance. They are likely to tell different stories to each parent and are anxious to prove loyalty and love.

Age 7 - 9

These children have begun to develop self-reflective thinking. They can recognise their own mixed feelings. They can hold more than one perspective at a time. They may start to look at the viewpoints of each parent objectively. They will begin to make judgements about each parent and the parent’s own behaviour to the child and generally. They will begin to imagine how they are viewed by each parent, and sometimes get it wrong. Powerlessness, sadness and pain are most acute at this age and often seen in the child’s strong reactions to parental conflict.

Age 9 - 13

Conflicts of loyalty can be increasingly maintained. This age group are most likely to begin to make alignments with one or other parent. These alliances may vary greatly in strength from mild and secret

preference to open hostility where a child may refuse to visit or even reject the other parent entirely. They may wish to keep a safe distance from parental conflict and battles. In doing so, they may feel it necessary to give up a loved parent.

Age 13 - 15

The alliances made in the earlier age group continue often into adolescence. Teenagers develop their capacity for taking the perspective of third parties. With this greater objectivity, they can withdraw strategically and obviously from parental fights. Boys are more likely to be more obvious emotionally and behaviourally than girls in their responses.

Age 16 +

At this age, especially with parental separation, children look to their own independent life. They have their own concerns to make and develop relationships at all levels. They may show particular anger and resentments at having to “parent” one parent, or to be involved in loyalty conflicts.

The above can only be guidelines and is basic. The effect of parental conflict in itself can cause both behavioural regression and inappropriate (advanced) maturity in children. Please speak to a specialist if you have anxieties about your child at a time of parental separation or later. It may often be beneficial if both parents together deal with any difficulties of the child, whatever may have been the differences of the parents in their own relationship. Mediation is especially helpful in this.

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