

# **Because it's for the Kids - Building a secure parenting base after separation**

Being separated parents can be very hard work. This booklet offers support, ideas and wisdom to help you work it out; because it's for the kids.

by Jennifer McIntosh, Ph.D

## **Building a secure parenting base after separation**

Many people say being a parent is the best but hardest job in the world, and we don't get proper training for it.

Separation between parents is also hard – to put it mildly – and there's no training for that either.

There's no doubt that being a separated parent can be hard, emotional work.

It can be difficult to know what you need and want, and what your children need and want.

## **A secure base**

With the right support, most parents can find a way to build a secure base for their children after separation. That's good for parents, and vital for their kids.

We hope this booklet helps you do that.

## **Is separation harmful for kids?**

If it is managed well by the adults, separation doesn't have to be harmful for children in the long run.

## **Is conflict between parents harmful for kids?**

Sometimes. What hurts children and their development the most, short and long term, is ongoing adult conflict that doesn't get sorted out.

## **The good news: kids can cope with conflict between parents so long as:**

- the conflict is not violent
- the conflict is not frequent
- parents work at sorting it out
- kids understand they are not to blame
- kids are not caught in the middle of it.

In fact, children of all ages can learn good coping skills, provided they are not too stressed by what is happening in the family.

## **What happens when separating doesn't stop the conflict?**

Some parents can sort out their differences with a separation. For many, conflict grows around the time of separating and continues long after divorce. This is very stressful for parents... and for children.

It's doubly important to think about what children need in these situations.

## **What does high conflict look like?**

Conflict comes in different shapes and sizes.

Parents in high conflict typically do these sorts of things with each other:

- remain very angry
- distrust each other
- become verbally abusive
- avoid each other unnecessarily
- argue or interfere
- go to court a lot
- threaten, intimidate or try to control their ex-partner
- are aggressive or violent
- have trouble communicating about the children
- criticize each other's parenting.

That's hard for anyone to live with, and important to change, because...

## **Parents' ongoing conflict costs kids too much...**

Research shows the sad truth that conflict between parents that goes on and doesn't get resolved is very hard on children and teenagers, and can affect the way they develop:

- they lose their ability to trust
- they make poor attachments to their parents
- they don't believe in themselves
- they get overwhelmed by their feelings
- they show their distress in bad behaviour
- they have trouble making and keeping friends
- they aren't confident
- they don't perform as well at school
- they have trouble making healthy adult relationships.

## **Something to think about**

One in four children from separated families suffers from poor mental health. That's a lot more than "normal".

Separation doesn't cause this. Long, bitter, unresolved conflict does.

Children's energy gets drained by high or frequent conflict between parents, when mums and dads can't 'be there' for them, because their minds are full of tension and anger.

Babies and young children are especially vulnerable to both family conflict and being looked after by overwhelmed parents.

### **Conflict costs parents a lot too, such as:**

- Worry and anger that goes on and on.
- Depression.
- Losing perspective: forgetting what's important.
- Not feeling like a good parent.
- Money for mediators, counsellors.
- Nerve-racking and expensive legal processes.
- Time lost from work.
- Forgetting there are solutions, not just problems.

### **You can protect your children from your conflict.**

Parents in conflict with their ex-partner need support to sort it out. In the meantime, children can be protected from adults' tensions when both parents:

- keep the child out of the middle of their arguments
- never ask the child to carry messages to the other parent
- don't ask the child personal questions about the other parent
- make arrangements that suit the child
- know their child may have different feelings from the ones they have
- try to notice what it's really like for the child
- give permission for the child to enjoy their other parent
- help the child to have a healthy relationship with their other parent
- notice when the tension is being soaked up by their child
- remember that children can twist themselves into strange shapes inside, in order to cope with conflict between the people they love most.

### **What's time got to do with it?**

Some parents focus on how much time they will each get with the children.

From your children's point of view, it's much more important to work out what kind of support they need from each of you.

Read on...

### **What children need when Mum and Dad separate**

What children need after their parents separate is exactly what they needed before: a secure emotional base.

### **What all children need when Mum and Dad separate**

Children need a secure base with parents they trust and feel comforted by.

Above all they need:

- a secure base for exploring, growing and developing
- help to solve their problems
- encouragement to learn
- routines that help them feel in control
- firm and loving limits to be safely independent
- a trusted parent when they need to be dependent
- protection from trauma.

Good parents don't get it right all of the time, but they do try to repair mistakes when they happen.

### **What babies need when Mum and Dad separate**

Babies need all of that, plus a bit extra. Babies need more help to manage their feelings.

They need predictability, and a lot of time with parents who nurture them. They need parents who play with them, listen carefully to their efforts to communicate, and who keep their world small and safe.

If they've had a safe and nurturing relationship with both parents, they need to continue to have that. They need visiting schedules that don't overwhelm them with too much change, or with conflict between their parents. Babies need parents who are tuned into their needs, rather than having to be tuned in to Mum's or Dad's feelings.

### **What teenagers need when Mum and Dad separate**

They may be on their way to adulthood, but teenagers still need a secure base with their parents, in order to reach their potential.

It's the little, day-to-day things that matter. Research shows that the best parenting for teenagers after separation is done by keeping the daily stress in the teenager's life as low as possible.

This happens when:

- Mum and Dad are 'there' on a daily basis to listen and give support. That can be in person or by making sure that your teenager knows how to reach you by phone or email, and knows that you will make every effort to be available when they need you. Those check-in calls are so important: "Just calling to see how things are today".
- Each house has a daily routine that is predictable, and has consistent rules and expectations. Parents arrive home when they say they will, provide meals on time, and give a good structure to the teenager's day, that helps them manage their load. This really reduces the daily stress that teenagers can feel.
- Parents are able to keep tabs on their teenager and take a real interest in their life. Without intruding too much, these parents share in their teenager's interests, know

what they need to get on with their activities, know where they are, and how they are spending their time.

- Each parent remembers special days in their teenager's life, and takes part in them as best they can. That includes the big days like birthdays, and the other moments that are important. The "of course I'll be there" message or the "good luck" calls before the big match are worth their weight in gold.
- Parents don't rely on the teenager to give messages to the other parent. This really stresses adolescents, especially when they become the target of Mum's or Dad's frustration when a message goes astray, or when they don't get the answer they wanted. Teenagers who feel caught between their parents are at the highest risk for problems. Parents need to speak directly to each other whenever possible, because even an apparently harmless message can cause stress for the teenager.
- Teenagers feel close to their parents.
- Step-parents have a good relationship with the teenager.

### **What about teenagers and conflict?**

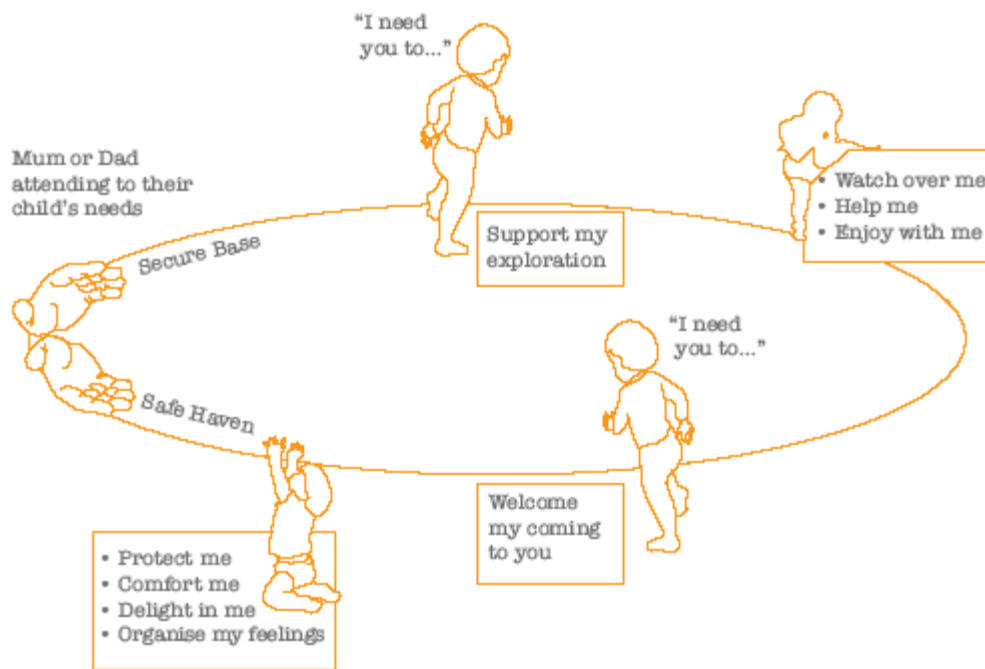
Adolescents are very aware of conflict between Mum and Dad, and, like younger children, they do best when their parents manage that conflict and keep it low. They aren't as likely to blame themselves for trouble between their parents as little kids are. However, teenagers from high conflict families often leave home earlier than their friends who live in low conflict homes. So the message for parents of teenagers is the same as with all kids: keep your conflict low and keep your teenager out of communication between you and your ex-partner.

### **This picture tells the story of the circle of security...**

Always be bigger, stronger,  
wiser, and kind.

Whenever possible follow  
my child's needs.

Whenever necessary take charge.



Adapted from ©2000 Cooper, Hoffman, Marvin & Powell

Diagram depicting the story of the circle of security

"Mum and Dad attending to their child's needs"

Two hands open out from the palm, a large loop circles from one hand to the other

Along the loop are words and multiple illustrations of a child

From the left hand is a loop titled "secure base". Along loop is an illustration of a child walking away from the hand with the words "I need you to..." A text box under the child contains the words "support my exploration".

Loop continues with an illustration of a child climbing on a text box which contains the words "watch over me, help me, enjoy with me" contained within the box.

Loop curves back towards right hand. Along the loop is an illustration of a child walking back towards the hand, a text box underneath contains the words, "welcome my coming to you".

Further along loop is an illustration of a child kneeling with their arms outstretched. The text box beside the child contains the words "protect me, comfort me, delight in me, organise my feelings".

The Loop closes with right hand and title "safe haven".

## **Usually, parents manage to provide all of that between them**

How can you do it when you're separated, especially when the separation hasn't been easy?

You need to be in a certain state of mind to provide all of that, so first things first...

## **Clearing a space for thinking**

Going through separation takes up a lot of mental and emotional energy. If there's conflict on top of separation, a parent's mind can become crowded with stress and strong, painful feelings.

With all of this, it can be hard to have space for thinking clearly about your children.

## **Parenting styles after separation**

There are three major patterns of parenting after separation:

### **1. Cooperative parenting**

About one third of parents look after their children cooperatively after separation. They talk to each other, plan and make decisions together about their children. They work out a living arrangement that works for everyone.

### **2. Two-track parenting**

About one third of parents find it hard to cooperate, but agree to parent their children responsibly, in their own ways. These parents don't talk to each other much, but they do have ways of planning and making decisions so that the children aren't too stressed. This is sometimes called parallel parenting.

### **3. Conflicted parenting**

About one third of parents end up in long-term conflict with each other. They can't find a way of parenting together, so they choose to stay locked in sad and bitter conflict. For many, the conflict is very high, very long and very damaging for them and for their children.

## **Parents who manage their conflict:**

- work through their emotions about being separate
- aren't stuck in disbelief, rage, rejection or grief
- find a safe outlet for their emotions
- separate being a parent from being an ex-partner
- focus equally on their own needs and their children's needs
- move beyond resentment and revenge
- look at solutions

- get good advice from friends, relatives, or professionals
- don't use violence.

Parents who can make room for thinking about their children's needs, apart from their own needs, are the parents who help their children adapt best to family separation.

And that matters a lot, as Rachel tells us...

### **Inside of me**

My Mum and my Dad are inside who I am.  
 They are part of me, wherever I go.  
 When they divorced, they hated each other,  
 And that was like they hated me.  
 When they hurt each other, they hurt me.  
 When Mum didn't want me to see Dad,  
 She wasn't seeing me.  
 When Dad didn't want me to love Mum, he wasn't loving me.  
 Now that's stopped, and they get on OK,  
 So I can be who I am, with my Mum and my Dad inside me.

Rachel, aged 11.

There is no vaccine against persistent parental conflict.  
 Prevention is better than cure.

- Keep your conflict away from your children
- Listen carefully to how they feel about things
- Let them know you are trying to sort out differences
- Explain that it's not your children's fault
- Be positive about the other parent with the child (even when that isn't easy)
- Don't let your child play messenger between parents
- Never allow your children to take sides against a parent
- Try to stay out of court – negotiate, don't litigate

Child focused mediation and counselling can help the whole family through conflict and separation.

### **Here are some ideas about building a secure base for your children after separation.**

#### **Try answering these questions**

1. What is it like to be your child at the moment?
2. What are you doing well to help them through this time?
3. What would you like to do differently for them?
4. Do your children ever get caught up in your conflict?
5. Who helps them with the confusion and sadness that all children feel at this time?
6. What opportunity can you make to talk with your children openly about how they are feeling?



## **Add these ideas to your discussions**

When they separate, parents make agreements about houses, finance, contact, schools, holidays, and so on. That's important. But, for the kids, consider these things as well. (If you're in mediation or counselling, try doing this there.)

## **For parents in conflict: try answering these questions**

1. What will your children's worst memory be of your conflict?
2. What will their best memory be of how you handled the conflict?
3. The hopes we share for our children are:
4. Our children need a secure emotional base with each of us. To provide that, and to protect it, we agree to:
5. When our children are adults and look back on the family separation, we hope they will be able to say the following about us as parents:

So, the messages we want to give our children now are:

## **Acknowledgements**

"Because it's for the kids... Building a Secure Parenting Base after Separation" is a Children in Focus publication intended to reach out to Australian parents in need of support to work on cooperative parenting after separation. The booklet is also designed to assist professionals in their work with these parents.

This booklet was written by Jennifer McIntosh, PhD. As senior consultant to the Children in Focus Program, researcher, child psychologist, and mother, Jenn holds a strong focus on the needs of children and parents in the face of family trauma. She is particularly regarded for her compassion and her strong advocacy on the rights of children to psychological safety. Jenn directs the family psychology clinic, Family Transitions, a specialist centre for assessment, therapy, Family Law mediation and training.

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### **Learning more...**

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The White Pages of telephone directories list community and government services for families, children and parents. Also, the local parent line, citizens' advice bureau or library may be able to assist.

Disclaimer: These contacts are for your guidance only and were accurate at the time of publishing.