

It should be no surprise that an important key to ensuring your children's well-being through this transition is communication. However, too much or too little too communication can be problematic. Recall previously that we recommend that parents together have the initial conversation about separating with their children. Both parents should be available whenever children feel the need to discuss their feelings. Depending on your child's age, you might hear the same questions over and over again. It is important that you remain patient and know that your child is looking to you for stability. Your answers should be consistent, although you are not expected to know the answers to every question; it is certainly okay to let your children know that. Try to refrain from speaking with your children regarding the practical aspects of their living situation when you are very upset. They need to feel secure in the knowledge that they will be safe, so their questions on these topics are best addressed when you can focus on their needs and provide the reassurance they're seeking.

Another common trap for parents is over-explaining. It's easy to believe that children should have complete knowledge of every aspect of the parents' relationship, so frequently, parents who are hurt or who oppose the separation will begin a habit of over-explaining. In general, you should keep explanations to your small children (between 2 and 5 years old) relatively brief. As above, a child's primary need at this stage is reassurance. They need to know that their immediate needs will be met and that both parents love them. At the same time, remember that children are very resilient and can adapt to many changes; children are often more adaptable than adults. Do not assume that your difficulty in adjusting will necessarily mean your child will have the same difficulty.

Older children (between 6 and 10 years old) tend to ask the same questions over and over again. Depending on the child, you might be very surprised at the level of sophistication in their concerns. Reassurance at this stage is also very important. In addition to the care and concern of both parents, let children know about the areas of life that will remain stable. Your child will be looking to you for cues about how to feel about the situation. It is perfectly appropriate for your children to see you emotional, but they should also experience you communicating in a calm and rational manner. They will learn it is acceptable to have emotions and express feelings appropriately. How parents treat one another is what most adversely affect kids.

Pre-teens and adolescents also need a certain amount of assurance. Although they will likely say that everything is 'fine,' they will also appreciate the reassurance their parents will be involved in their lives and that certain routines and living situations will remain stable. Pre-teens are more attuned than younger children to relationships, so your respect and consideration for the other parent will be very visible. They are also more attuned to subtle gestures like rolling of the eyes, tone of voice, and overall attitude, so be mindful of these as you communicate with your co-parent.

One positive way to communicate with children of all ages is by spending time with them. Making time for each of your children every day (and individually if possible) will speak volumes about what is important to you. Rarely has a parent regretted spending too much time with their children, getting down to their level, and experiencing life with them.

Should I cry in front of my children?

You should not be afraid to show emotions around your children. Seeing you be work through your emotions will let them know that having difficult feelings and expressing pain are not negative things. You will be teaching them to respect their emotions and to express them in appropriate ways. Parents often feel ashamed when children are there to comfort them. In moderation, this is certainly not harmful for your child, and it can also be quite empowering. The thing to remember is that if you are overwhelmed with emotions on a regular basis, you need to find other outlets for them away from your children. You will want the times you react rationally and logically around your children to outweigh the times you react emotionally.

Understanding my responsibility to my children's emotional reactions?

Expect that your children will have emotional responses. These are opportunities for you to validate sad, angry, or anxious feelings. Listen for the emotion behind what your child is saying and respond to the emotion, rather than the content. For example, if your child is expressing reluctance to sleep in a new home, you can say: 'It sounds like you are nervous about staying in the new home tonight.' Letting them respond gives them an opportunity to talk about the feeling of nervousness. At this point, whatever they say should be followed up with a question like: 'What specifically makes you nervous?' 'What does that feel like?' In addition to allowing them to talk about these feelings, you will be gathering information about how to provide some reassurance.

Avoid negating these feelings or saying anything like they are being silly, stupid, babyish, or any other put-down. Each of these forms of dismissal tells your child that his or her feelings are not okay. On the other hand, asking questions about the feelings and giving permission for those feelings to exist will teach your child a great deal about exploring emotions and expressing them constructively.

Normal reactions to divorce or separation

The following reactions are normal for children after finding out their parents are separating.

- Your kids may express anger and resentment with you and your co-parent for upsetting their sense of normalcy.
- They may appear extremely anxious having to face this big change in their life.
- Depression and sadness about the family's new situation is normal. A. sense of hopelessness and helplessness could form into a mild form of depression.
- It will take some time for your kids to work through their issues but you should see gradual improvement over time.

How do I balance doing what my children want and doing what is best for them?

The key here is balance. Be on the lookout for times when you can offer your child choices.

This habit will empower them and show them their ideas and opinions count. At the same time, you don't have to feel like all decisions have to be approved by the children. Get used to the idea that you will be making decisions for your children that they will not like or agree with. This is a good thing. Although children may express some negative feelings about some of your decisions, they will ultimately feel a sense of security that you are making such decisions and taking control. Don't be afraid of your child's emotional reactions; make room for them, discuss them, and they will pass.

Remember to tell your children verbally that you love them. They should also experience this love through your words and your actions. Stay involved with what is important to them, including their hobbies and extracurricular activities. Let them know that friends who are important to them are also important to you. Open communication should be encouraged but not forced. Your children should feel that even when you have a disagreement with them, you are interested in their opinions and perspectives. You can validate your child's opinion without agreeing with it. Fourteen-year-old daughter: 'I want to stay up until eleven o'clock tonight; there is a movie I want to watch.' Parent: 'I understand that you really want to see this movie and it is important to you. But tonight is a school night, and your bedtime is ten p.m.' Even though your child might be angry with your decision and may disagree with it, you are letting them know that you understand their perspective, and this will be validating even though they are not getting their way.

Overwhelmingly, a major challenge parents face is the temptation to slack off discipline and to provide their child whatever material things they ask for. This is common enough for parents who are married, but even more common among those who aren't together anymore. Many such parents feel their children have suffered so much already and therefore should get whatever they ask for. This is a big mistake. It's difficult to resist the urge to give in to guilt; however, the only thing children learn by always getting what they want is that they can manipulate people. Far too many parents wish they had never begun giving in to their children's every whim.

A related issue arises when you are making good choices for your kids, but your co-parent is spoiling them by giving them everything they want and not enforcing discipline or structure. This is an unfortunate circumstance, but there is usually little you can do about it. If you are lucky enough to have a relationship with your co-parent where you give and receive feedback from one another, then by all means you can point out areas for improvement. More likely, however, is a situation where parents will not feel comfortable giving and taking such advice. You should go on enforcing rules, structure, and a respectful, safe atmosphere in your home and hope your co-parent realizes that a lack of structure and spoiling are very destructive. By now you should be expecting the next five words: **keep doing the right thing.**

How should we handle issues that arise around visitation?

If your child complains, becomes sad, or throws a tantrum every time they are to visit the other parent, it is important that you see this reaction for what it is. Children will often have such reactions in front of you because they feel it is the response you want to see from them. Frequently, when they are with the other parent, they are fine and thriving. It is

important to be firm about the importance of visiting and spending time with the other parent. Your children might see you as the 'enemy' by forcing them to go, but it is the right thing to do. The rare exception would be if you had a genuine belief that your child would be abused or neglected by the other parent or another person in the other parent's household. In these situations, it is your responsibility to ensure your child's safety. Otherwise, you should calmly and unemotionally let your children know that visitation with the other parent is mandatory. This becomes more challenging with teenagers who feel they are old enough to make their own decisions regarding visitation.

If you are the parent your child is reluctant to visit, your challenge will be different. First off, show some understanding for your co-parent who is dealing with a child who says they do not want to visit you. Also, recognize that your child is probably responding more to a stressful situation and less to who you are as a parent. If your child is saying they do not want to visit or spend time with you, you might need to ask yourself some uncomfortable questions: How are we spending our visitation time? Am I available to my children during visitation? Am I taking time to listen to them and participate in their lives? Do I look forward to visitation and the time that I spend with my children? If after taking an honest inventory of yourself as a parent, you feel you are providing a very safe, structured, and loving, environment, then you should assume that your child is reacting to the situation and not take personally their reluctance to visit with you. You might have to make some short-term accommodations to their wishes while letting them know that visitation with you is required. The key here is not to get caught up in your child's emotional response, but to deal with them and your co-parent with reason, flexibility, and loving concern.

When your child returns from a visit with your co-parent, do not grill them for information. It's helpful to demonstrate a healthy sense of curiosity about the time they spend together, but do not ask interrogating questions. You should be excited for them if they are excited about the time they spent, and be available to listen when there are issues that arise. If your child expresses some concerns about something that occurred during a visit, you should let them know that you will discuss the issue with the other parent at the appropriate time. When engaging your co-parent regarding a problem during visitation, avoid blaming or attacking the other parent. Instead, hear their telling of the incident by asking curious, non-blaming questions. Remember that there are two sides to every story, and continually siding with your child against the other parent will merely foster angry and resentful feelings.

VIDEO IS HERE

Checklist for helpful parental healthy communication:

- Am I fostering open communication with my children?
- Am I supporting my child's relationship with both parents?
- Am I communicating with my child in age-appropriate ways?
- Am I refraining from:
 - Using my children to communicate with the other parent?
 - Getting caught up in my child's emotional response?
 - Grilling them when they return from visitation?

- Spoiling children and letting them always get their way?
- Am I encouraging my child's hobbies, interests, and routines?
- Am I supporting communication but not forcing it?
- Am I providing consistent discipline and consequences for inappropriate behavior?
- Do I make room for the other parent's parenting style even if I disagree with it sometimes?
- Am I seeking assistance for problems that have become unmanageable?