

Steps parents take

How parents have tried to lessen the impacts of separation on their children and themselves

When parents separate it can be hard on everyone in the family, but there are things you can do to support your children's wellbeing and your own.

Knowing what has worked for other parents can help you think of ways to look after yourself and keep relationships with your children strong during this tough time.

Emerging Minds invited a group of parents who have navigated separation to tell us about the ways they tried to reduce the impacts of separation on themselves and their children. Some of the strategies and supports they found helpful are shared below.

Before you read this resource, take a moment to think about:

- What are you already doing to cope with the stresses and look after yourself?
- What are some things you are already doing to keep focused on your children's needs and help them cope with change?
- What is working for your family that you will keep doing or could build on?

As you read, you might like to think about:

- Which of these ideas stand out or 'make sense' to you?
- Are there any you can try now, or plan to try when the time is right?
- Do any of them spark ideas about other ways to support your family?



Maintaining and nurturing relationships with children

It can be hard to find the time and energy, but it is important to communicate openly and spend time talking, playing or just hanging out with your children. This helps them feel connected and safe, while giving them space to ask questions or share their feelings and worries with you.

What worked for other parents

'I tried to prioritise my relationships with the kids.'

'Using Snapchat to stay connected with my daughter. This was really precious, even though I hate Snapchat!'

'Communicating on their terms. For me this meant learning about social media and connecting with them through this.'

'Being honest with both the kids, but at their level – so not giving them too much information obviously, but letting them know what was going on. Sometimes, it was worse when they didn't have the information. We think that we're trying to protect them but we're making it worse.'

'Keeping in touch with what the kids are doing is important. Being there for what the kids like.'

'I focused on building a strong bond with my child. It was a frame of mind, quality of time, doing lots of activities together. I knew the time with my child would go quickly. So I'd appreciate time with my child. I didn't want to waste my time thinking negatively.'

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Always telling my kids: “I've got you, it's OK.”

'I'd tell my kids, “Yes, this is a s*** situation, this is how we're going to deal with it. What do you think? What do you need from me?” Let them speak. They have voice from a very early age, they are their own people, we don't give them credit.'

'Admitting that “It's a s*** time, things aren't going well, this is what I'm going to do to try to make it better” is a huge message to kids. Talking about it helps build up resilience in ourselves and our kids.'

'Open and honest conversations with my kids. Age-appropriate. So, they know that they can come to me with their concerns.'

'My ex and I always reverted to “What do the kids want to do?” Putting the kids first and giving them a sense of control within a situation they didn't have control over.'

Support networks

During challenging times, we all need to draw support from people around us. Think about who can best support you, both practically and emotionally, right now.

What worked for other parents

'Considering the “network around the child” and the “love around the child”. I don't mean just one particular adult, but having many safe adults that care and show love for that child.'



'Connecting with other parents who had similar situations, so I didn't feel like I was the only one going through this.'

'I had a go-to list of people I trusted when I needed to.'

'When you're in a moment of doubt or hurt or pain or confusion, what was helpful to me, and what still is, is this 'membership' of people. So, I recalled my parents who had passed away and had never experienced my children. I would think, “What would Mum or Dad be having a conversation with me about, sitting alongside me, to lift my spirits, to guide me?” I took solace in having conversations with my parents, my ancestors, so I could be strong and proud and build myself up and show vulnerability to my daughter and be truthful to that.'

'I sought support for myself through counselling, and for my kids with a youth counsellor. They listened to the kids, listened for the benefit of the kids' wellbeing, not just for court, and that was really helpful.'

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I found supportive people the kids could talk to without me if they need.

'One of the things I would recommend is trying to find other people in a similar situation, so searching groups on Facebook. You could follow “single mum” pages or budgeting pages or relationship ones. Even if you don't want to be brave enough to comment, sometimes it's really nice to read the comments and think, “Oh, that's a really good idea” or “I know how you're feeling.”'

Communicating and interacting with the other parent

It's common for separating or separated parents to have challenges communicating with one another, but for the benefit of your children and your own wellbeing it's important to find healthy and constructive ways to interact.

What worked for other parents

'Both parties need to be able to say what they would like and then obviously come to some sort of arrangement around that. Communication has got to be respectful as well, so that's a hard one to police, but we've got to have our own boundaries.'

'Remembering that the child will always be half of each of us, so showing “care” for the other parent is important for my children to observe.'

'Easier said than done I know, but put differences aside and go to important events together. Initially we couldn't sit together but in the end we could and the kids saw this. In the end we joint-hosted birthdays.'

‘Even though my ex-partner and I didn’t get along, he gave me this child. It was really important for me to keep that in mind. My son wouldn’t be who he was without that person. It made me feel grateful – even though I didn’t like my ex-partner I was still grateful. It helped keep me positive and put a different spin on it when I started to feel negative.’

‘I would talk to my ex-partner if I had heard something from the kids I wasn’t happy about. I’d let them know that “This is what the kids have said” and ask them “Can you not do it please?”’

‘Seeking to have gratitude is really helpful and really healing. I’m grateful that I made such a beautiful child with my ex-wife, and I see my ex-wife in my daughter, she’s a part of her mum and she’s got a part of me there too. So, it’s about acceptance and being grateful for that child there.’

Dealing with common assumptions and messages

You’ll likely hear some unhelpful messages and assumptions about separation and divorce. Taking care of yourself might mean avoiding certain people or situations (including online) and reminding yourself of your values and strengths as a person, and as a parent.

What worked for other parents

‘Remember to be myself and be authentic. I didn’t always do it, but I tried. I was aware of the stereotypes and assumptions in my situation, and the way to stand up to those was to be myself. Because when you get those assumptions happening all the time, you can almost step into them without realising it. So, keeping my authenticity helped to bear the brunt of the assumptions, but also pushed against them as well.’

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I reassured my kids that it is OK for me to be a single parent. I know that kids can thrive in single parent families.

‘It was helpful to challenge the judgements and perceptions of others, and I owned my identity as a separated parent. When you’re with other people, they form assumptions pretty quickly. I used it to empower me and forge a new identity. I used it to really challenge tricky situations as well, going through mediation, a courts process. I think it was really helpful in challenging stereotypes.’



Looking after yourself

It can be hard to prioritise your own wellbeing during difficult times. But you need to look after yourself and find strategies that will help you stay calm when facing stress so that you are able to support your children.

What worked for other parents

‘I needed regular breaks from my kids so I could be in a good space to support them better.’

‘I learnt to outsource as a single-parent. I can’t do it all.’

‘The block function on social media is your friend.’

‘Self-care – not laying on the lounge and reading a book – but building yourself up as a parent, so this then helps the kids too.’

‘I needed to develop my identity as a human. A new identity that included work and was more than just parenting.’

‘Having time away from your kids makes you a better parent. Just having that space away so you can feel like yourself as well.’

Being the best parent I could be

It’s common to feel that you’re not parenting the way you want to when you are dealing with the stresses and strains of separation. Showing your children how to deal with challenges in life, and staying connected to support each other during tough times, are two of the most important things a parent can do.

What worked for other parents

'Modelling emotions for my kids – I was a "shower-crier" and noticed the negative impacts this hiding my emotions had on my daughter. Now I cry in front of my kids and let them know that mum is sad at the moment, but she'll be OK, and here's some things she'll do to feel better.'

'Being OK with the fact the kids are going to talk to each of us (parents) differently.'



Creating new family traditions and celebrations.

'I used to educate myself, like do reading on positive parenting. It had to be things that fitted with my family given our situation, things I could do, like practical things, and things I could relate to.'

'I tried to educate myself to get a better job so I could provide better for my kids.'

'I think of how our life experiences make us who we are today.'

'We all get through it somehow. Celebrating the resilience we have within us. We might not know it, other people might see it, or they may not. So it's us showing our resilience, and that passes down to our kids as well.'

Your ideas

Do you have other ideas that have been helpful for your family that you'd like to share with families facing similar circumstances?

Use the 'Share your ideas' link or scan the QR code below and enter your ideas for possible inclusion in future editions of this resource!