Divorce and separation

Family separation and divorce are times of great change and it can be stressful for children, young people and their families.

How might children and young people react?

Each child or young person will respond differently to the change in family dynamics, depending on many factors such as their:

- personality
- coping style
- relationship with family members
- community's expectations

Other contributing factors include:

- how their family is coping
- the messages they receive about the separation.

It's worth noting that children and young people from the same family may also respond differently.

Look out for changes in their normal behaviours as a guide to understanding how individuals are coping and if they need additional support.

Children

Sometimes children talk about how they are feeling, but more often children communicate through their behaviour.

Changes you might notice include:

- increased anxiety – for example, wanting to stay close to their families
- increased anger or conflict with others
- trying hard to be "good" – for example a child may be concerned about a family member's distress, or worry that if they misbehave, the family member who has primary care of them will leave them too
- protectiveness toward one family member– blaming and rejecting the other.

These are common reactions to the sense of loss and powerlessness that many children feel in these circumstances. Their feelings and reactions can become more complicated when someone starts a new relationship.

Young People

During adolescence, young people are going through a lot of social, emotional and physical changes.

Separation and divorce can complicate these normal ups and downs. It can be hard to know whether changes in behavior is normal "teenager behavior" or whether it's a sign a young person needs support. It could be a combination of both.

Like children, young people may not be able to easily express their experiences or worries.

Some signs that they may need extra support include:

- behavior, mood or personality changes (for instance, getting angry, upset or tearful more than usual.)
- not wanting to be around family, kin or community
- problems with their schoolwork
- problems with sleep (reported to you or observed through excessive tiredness in class)

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- changes to eating habits like binge eating or loss of appetite
- losing interest in activities they usually enjoy
- experiencing challenges with friends or peer groups
- taking risks like challenging school rules, shoplifting, graffiti, taking drugs or binge drinking.

Children and young people whose family are separated or divorced will all react to and experience this event differently. However, it's helpful to keep in mind that:

- If children and young people are regularly moving between two households, this may be associated with practical and emotional difficulties.
- If young people are living in single-parent families, they may have additional household responsibilities.
- Family transitions (for example, becoming a blended family) following divorce may be as significant as the divorce in terms of their impact.
- Children and young people manage the changes associated with separation better when their whole family is adjusting well to change.
- Strict routines and lots of conflict between family members can affect children and young people's wellbeing and their learning.

Supporting children and young people

You can support children and young people by:

- seeking information from families, kinship networks and community on their new routine
- completing a return to school plan with the family and the child or young person if they are returning after a period of absence
- ensuring there is routine and structure in the classroom, to help children and young people feel safe and secure
- acknowledging the child or young person's feelings about the separation – for example, if a child expresses sadness that they haven't seen a parent for a few days, you could acknowledge how hard this is and how it makes them feel
- using the BETLS Observational tool to help you observe any changes in their behaviour, coping or emotions, and communicating with the family about these changes
- learning more about observing children and young people's behaviour; inquiring sensitively about your concerns; and providing support for children, young people and their families, in the Early Support domain
- being aware that separation can be a risk factor for mental health issues, and if changes or concerns persist, seek support from senior leadership or wellbeing staff
- encouraging talking with a trusted adult about how they're feeling
- acknowledging that it's a difficult time for the family
- being understanding of the difficulties that could arise from moving between two houses (for example, schoolbooks being left at the other house)
- encouraging communication with their family about the changes and any problems.

Supporting families

You can support families by:

- understanding that the parents themselves may also be experiencing strong emotions, distress, or stress, and that this can make the demands of parenting harder
- sharing information and observations about the children and young people in your care and how they're coping with the changes
- reassuring families that distress is a normal grief response in children and young people to separation, but that most recover without long-term impacts
- sensitively directing parents or families to appropriate supports to help them cope with

the changes and the additional demands of parenting, if required

- learning more about having discussions with families in the Family Partnerships domain.

Tips for families

Children and young people benefit when families:

- reassure them often that they'll not lose the love and care of either parent and demonstrate this with action
- explain what's happening as it relates to them (for example, where they'll be living, how they'll get to school), and let them know clearly what things will change and how, and what will stay the same
- try to maintain normal routines as far as possible, as this helps children and young people feel safer
- understand and acknowledge that children and young people may find it hard, and may react differently to other children in the family
- provide extra support before and after contact visits to help children and young people settle
- recognise that it's likely to be challenging for children and young people when either parent starts a new relationship
- get support for themselves to help them manage the stress of separation
- recognise that if there's ongoing conflict and hostility between family members, it's much harder for children and young people – their wellbeing can be impacted and they're more likely to require additional support
- avoid criticising the other parent to children and young people – conflict with the other parent should be addressed directly with them, and should not involve the child
- ensure children and young people are not overhearing negative conversations with family members, friends or outside supports
- allow older adolescents a more active role in the decision-making about their living arrangements.

If more support is required

If you have concerns about a child or young person, follow your learning community's processes. This might include talking to your wellbeing or leadership team and using tools such as the BETLS observational tool to help understand what support might be needed.

Be You Resources

Learn more about engaging positively and respectfully with First Nations communities in Reflect, Respect, Respond: Protocols for culturally respectful engagement.

Be You Professional Learning

Learn more about observing children and young people's behaviour; inquiring sensitively about your concerns; and providing support for children, young people and their families, in the Early Support domain.

Bibliography

Visit Divorce and separation for a list of references for this Fact Sheet.

**Be You acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of all the Lands on which we work and learn.
We recognise their deep and ongoing connection to Country and pay our respect to Elders, past and present.**