Parenting After Separation

What Your Child Needs From You Right Now

A developmental guide to supporting your children through family separation

Inside you'll find:

- What children need at each stage (0–5, 6–12, teens)
- What they're thinking but might not say
- What helps — and what makes it harder
- How to talk to your child about separation

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Before You Read This Guide

This guide is not about being a perfect parent. It's about being a present one. Separation is one of the most disorienting experiences a child can go through - not because of the separation itself, but because of what it means to them at their particular stage of development.

A note from Jasmin

> *What parents often tell me is that they don't know what their child is thinking or feeling — and that not knowing is one of the hardest parts. This guide gives you a developmental map. It won't tell you exactly what your child is experiencing, but it will help you understand what children at each age typically need — and how to give it.*

0 - 5 YEARS: The Foundation Stage

How young children experience separation

Children under five don't have the cognitive capacity to understand what separation means - but they are acutely sensitive to the emotional state of the adults around them. They experience change primarily through their body: sleep disruption, clinginess, regression, changes in appetite. They cannot hold both parents in mind at once, which means the parent they are not with can feel, to them, like they no longer exist.

What they're thinking but can't say

"Where is Mummy/Daddy? Are they coming back?"

"Did I do something wrong?"

"I don't feel safe when the grown-ups are upset."

"I need my routines. When things change, I don't know what's coming next."

What helps

Consistent routine: Same sleep times, same bedtime rituals, same foods where possible. Routine is the primary language of safety for this age group.

Physical closeness: More cuddles, more physical reassurance, more time on your lap. Don't worry about spoiling them, they need to feel your presence.

Naming the absent parent positively: "Daddy is at his house and he loves you very much." Simple, true, and repeated.

Keeping your emotions off the floor: Not burying them - managing them away from your child. Even very young children co-regulate with caregivers.

Short transitions: For this age, more frequent shorter visits can be easier than long separations, especially in the early months.

What makes it harder

- Picking up on parental conflict or distress at handovers
- Long separations from primary caregiver before a secure attachment has been established
- Inconsistent or frequently changing routines
- Adults crying, arguing, or appearing frightened in the child's presence
- Negative talk about the other parent, even if the child doesn't understand the words

How to talk to a 0–5 year old about separation

Keep it simple, concrete, and repeated. Don't over-explain.

"Mummy and Daddy don't live together anymore. You have two homes now - Mummy's house and Daddy's house. We both love you very, very much and that will never change."

Use physical props where helpful - a simple drawing of two houses, a photo of each parent to take between homes.

6 - 12 YEARS: The Middle Years

How school-age children experience separation

Children in this age group have enough cognitive development to understand what separation means - but not enough emotional maturity to process it. They often internalise their feelings to protect the adults they love. They may appear fine at home and fall apart at school, or vice versa. They are highly attuned to loyalty conflicts and will go to great lengths to avoid feeling they have to choose.

What they're thinking but might not say

> *"Is this my fault? Did I cause this?"*

> *"I can't be happy at Dad's because Mum will be sad."*

> *"I feel like I have to look after Mum/Dad."*

> *"I'm embarrassed. None of my friends' parents are separated."*

> *"I want things to go back to how they were."*

What helps

Clear, age-appropriate explanation: They need to know what is happening, why, and what it means for them practically. Fill the information vacuum or they will fill it themselves.

Explicit permission to love both parents: "It's completely okay to love Dad and enjoy your time with him. That doesn't mean you love me any less."

Keeping them out of adult business: No information about finances, legal matters, or your feelings about your co-parent. They are not your confidant.

Stable friendships and school routine: Peer relationships and school consistency are anchors for this age group. Protect them where possible.

Age-appropriate autonomy: Let them have some say - not over whether they go, but over small things within that: what they pack, what they'd like to do.

What makes it harder

- Being used as a messenger between parents
- Overhearing adult conversations about the separation, finances, or the other parent
- Being asked how things are at 'the other house' in ways that feel like interrogation
- Feeling responsible for a parent's emotional wellbeing
- Having their expressed preference treated as rejection

How to talk to a 6–12 year old about separation

Be honest, calm, and child-focused. Answer their questions directly.

"Mum and Dad have decided we're not going to live together anymore. This is a grown-up decision and it is absolutely not your fault - nothing you did caused this. We both love you completely and that is never going to change. You'll have time with both of us and we're both still your parents."

Invite questions but don't force them: "You might have some questions now, or later on. You can always ask me."

TEENAGERS (13+): Complexity and Independence

How teenagers experience separation

Teenagers are developmentally separating from their parents and family separation cuts across that process in complicated ways. They may respond with anger, withdrawal, or apparent indifference that masks real distress. They are forming their identity partly through their understanding of relationships and they are watching yours very closely.

What they're thinking but might not show

> *"I'm furious. I don't know who to be furious at, so it might be you."*

> *"I'm watching how you handle this. It's shaping what I think relationships are."*

> *"I don't want to talk about it, but I need to know you're okay."*

> *"I hate being treated like a pawn. I can see what's happening."*

> *"I need to be able to make some choices about my own time."*

What helps

Honest, adult-adjacent conversation: They can handle more information than younger children — but still not adult problems. Be honest about the situation without making them responsible for managing it.

Respecting their autonomy (with boundaries): Their schedule is more complex. Be flexible where you can, not because they're in charge, but because they have a life too.

Not putting them in the middle: They know when they're being used. It damages trust and the relationship far more than any short-term gain.

Modelling emotional regulation: Your teenager is watching how you handle hard things. This is one of the most powerful things you can do for their future relationships.

Low-key, consistent presence: Don't force connection. Make yourself available. Eat meals together. Drive them places. Connection happens in the in-between moments.

What makes it harder

- Being asked to be the 'man/woman of the house' or take on parental roles
- Parental dating or new relationships introduced too quickly
- Being asked to keep secrets from the other parent
- Feeling their social life is constantly disrupted by custody arrangements
- Witnessing a parent spiral emotionally with no support network

How to talk to a teenager about separation

Be direct. Acknowledge their feelings. Don't require them to manage yours.

"I want to talk to you properly about what's happening. Mum and I have separated. I'm not going to pretend everything's fine, but I want you to know I'm okay and I'm not going to fall apart. You don't need to look after me. I'm here for you."

Leave space for silence. They might not respond now but they're listening.

Across All Ages: The Things That Always Help

1. Never speak negatively about your co-parent in front of your children - at any age. Even if your child agrees with you, you are asking them to betray part of themselves.

2. Tell your children the separation is not their fault. Then tell them again. Children at every age carry this fear.

3. Protect their relationship with the other parent. Your child's wellbeing is bound up in having a relationship with both of their parents - even if you find that painful.

4. Look after yourself. A parent who is supported, resourced, and emotionally regulated is the single biggest protective factor for a child going through family separation.

Parenting After Separation's online courses support you to be the parent your children need right now. Visit parentingafterseparation.com.au to find the right program for your situation.