

Teenagers, Young Adults & Parental Separation

Many parents worry about how older children will deal with the separation of their parents. Adolescents are dealing with a great many things – they are changing physically and emotionally, they are trying to become adults and make their first steps towards independence – they may be starting to have relationships of their own. All these things can affect how they deal with their parents separating. Below are some hints and tips for parents which you may find useful.

- **Be respectful** – Older children and young adults have the right for you to respect their feelings. They are often struggling with growing up and may find your separation particularly difficult at a time when they need your attention and support. Try to put yourself in their shoes and not expect that they will be able to put themselves in yours
- **Think back** – you were an adolescent once. Try to think about what that felt like, how you behaved and what would have helped you most – and what you found difficult as far as your relationship with your parents was concerned
- **Difficult behaviour is not always associated with your separation** – Your child may be exhibiting normal adolescent behaviour rather than behaving badly because you are separating. Try not to assume that everything is connected with your separation. Adolescents need to test boundaries, have mood swings, be uncommunicative and spend time alone or with friends.
- **Keeping things balanced** – it is tempting when you separate to try to make things up to children by being overly generous, allowing changes to well-established routines or providing two very different models for discipline once separated. Try, wherever possible, to keep a balance. You may not agree on discipline – but you need to ensure that you are delivering a united front to your children – especially to teenagers who need continuing security at a time when they may feel that their life is changing and may be feeling insecure and different. Young adults can be particularly adept at playing their parents off against each other – although this may score some early benefits for them – invariably, they can end up frightened by the sense of power they have and ultimately blamed as the instigator of conflict between their parents – best not to go there in the first place!
- **Don't criticise their other parent** – often it can be easy to fall into assuming that an older child or near adult can be an ally or confidante for you – and is old enough to understand the differences between you and their other parent. This is very damaging for all children. You are the people whom they love best in the world, they don't want to take sides – and may be distressed or angered by your behaviour in trying to get them on side or leaning on them too heavily emotionally
- **Try not to nag** – when you are dealing with a difficult and emotional time yourself, a difficult teenager can feel like the last straw. Try to hold on to the fact that teenagers need to be difficult and to challenge as they struggle to become adults. They may also need extra sleep, time to be alone and to think – and may be uncommunicative. Make sure that they know you are available to them if they want to talk, that you understand how difficult things feel for them – and that as their parents, you love them. Acknowledge to them that this is a difficult time for everyone – but that you and their other parent will continue to work together to make things as best you can for them and their siblings. If things boil over, make sure you say sorry too – and be honest with them about how, when things are tough for everyone, it is easier to get into arguments.
- **Risk taking behaviour** – Adolescence is a time for experimentation. Be watchful for risk-taking behaviour. Some young people take risks as a means of dealing with unhappiness or insecurity. Others risk take as part of their growing up process. If you think your child is involving themselves in risk taking behaviour – don't panic – remember that many young people are going to experiment or take risks as part of a growing up process – and don't feel that your child is the only one. If possible, talk to your child, without accusing them, about your worries and concerns for and about them. Risk taking behaviour includes experimenting with alcohol, smoking, involvement with soft drugs, inappropriate sexual relationships. More serious risk taking behaviour, which may indicate a need for professional support includes self-harming, eating disorders, regular or heavy drug use. Try to get some sense of whether the child or young person has simply experimented or whether the behaviour is more frequent than a one off experiment. If you're worried, get professional advice and support. (See sources of help and support at the end of this guide) Try not to blame yourself – you need to stay confident in your role as their parent in order to help them through a difficult and confusing time.

- **Someone to talk to** – Try to make sure that you keep communications open with your child – keep them informed about what is happening as far as you can and appropriate to their age and understanding. Offer them opportunities to talk to you about how they are feeling by giving them your time. If they are finding it difficult to talk to you – think about whom, in the family or amongst your friends may be someone to whom they could talk about their feelings. Make sure that person is someone who can take a neutral view of the situation and suggest that your child might spend some time with them, or have that person make contact with the child to take them out. Encourage your child to find other ways of dealing with their inability to communicate their feelings – keeping a private journal or computer diary perhaps. If your adolescent child is having difficulty communicating their anger or sadness, think about activities that might help them to discharge some of those feelings – sporting activities, karate, or judo, circuit training etc are good ways of letting off steam
- **New families** – if you are in a new relationship and/or may be forming a new family – be careful to talk to your child about how you hope that will work for everyone – and seek their views. Do not assume that children from different families will get on – and try to put yourself in the children's shoes as to how it might feel to be joined together because of a new parental relationship. For teenagers, privacy is very important – don't assume or expect that they will share their room or belongings easily – and try wherever possible to avoid expecting that. Older children can also be very difficult with new partners – this is a normal reaction – and you and your new partner will need to work closely together to agree how you will deal with day to day living issues – and with discipline. Be aware that your former partner may also find your new relationship very difficult, at least initially, and may resent someone else having a 'parenting' role.
- **Running away** – We know that some children demonstrate their unhappiness by running away. Often, they may run to their other parent – if this happens try to work together as parents to keep a united front, to get an understanding of where the child wants to be (and why) and try to ensure that the child understands that you hope they will feel able to go happily between their two homes rather than see one as an alternative to the other. If you are the parent the child runs to – try not to 'blame' their other parent for poor parenting but rather understand how you can both help your child resolve their unhappiness and feel able to share their time with each and both of you.
- **Accepting independence** – Young people from social communities of their own. They will want to be with their friends, continue their activities, go to parties or see their boy or girlfriend. This can be difficult when you are sharing time with them. Arrangements that might have worked when they were younger are likely to be less do-able as children get older. Don't insist that they must spend time with you as per an existing arrangement. They will resent you for it and are not likely to be communicative or happy if they have been forced to be with you. As children mature, time spent with either of you should be their choice – not your right. Give them their freedom – and they are much more likely to choose to spend time with you – but remember as they grow up they will naturally grow away as they become adults. Be proud that you have raised an independent young adult rather than resentful that you're not getting your quota of time with them.

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