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## The way parents handle their separation, determines the outcome for children

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Photo: The way parents handle their separation, determines the outcome for children

The way parents handle their marriage breakdown and separation, rather than separation itself, is the primary contributor to how children are affected by the experience.

Which is why therapists are advised to educate parents, as well as children, if they're experiencing difficulty coping with their parents' divorce.

"Some Psychologists work with children as I do, and then educate parents as they go, as children bring up issues," says psychologist Nicole Pierotti.

"Separation causes a change in a child life that cannot be resolved.

"What's then important is how parents navigate these changes to their child's life, and help them with the new stress, without adding additional ones.

"The most damaging situation for a child to be in after separation is to have two parents who cannot communicate, or make decisions in the best interest of their child and feel that their rights are more important than their child's.



"Add in some anger and dare I say 'hate' to the other parent for past hurts, and this is a toxic environment for children."

Done right, separation can actually be a positive change for children, according to psychotherapist, Dr Karen Phillip.

"If the parents are aggressive or highly conflictual, research tells us children can thrive in a single household that is free of this, compared to living with both parents where conflict is escalated," she says.





“The children can go through a good separation unscathed.

“While they may not fully understand or like that mum and dad are living separately, parents who are united for their children can help make the transition smooth, supportive and loving.”

Ms Pierotti says the biggest mistake parents make is putting their own perceived rights and needs before those of the children.

“Children are not an asset to be divided - though that is mostly how family court appears to navigate their way through separation too,” she says.

“Strong attachment is the most important and having a stable home environment next.”

Putting the other parent, or their partner, down, and involving children in adult issues, such as discussing details surrounding the separation, can also have a detrimental impact.

“I talk to parents about ‘shared care’ rather than ‘divided lives’,” says Ms Pierotti.

“This is the gold standard in separation and care of children.

“Often though, you end up with your child living a divided life instead, and this is truly difficult for children, and quite damaging for many years to come.

“I tell parents that when they decide to separate, they need to think that they are still business partners. They are in the business of raising their child for another 10 years or so.

“If they had a real business and never spoke to, disagreed with everything their business partner ever said or suggested, fought over who spends more time etc, their business isn’t likely to do to well or to thrive.”

Unfortunately, many separations do start off toxic, and the damage to children can be quick and significant.

The good news though, is that it’s never too late to make a change.

“Regardless of what occurred and how parents initially managed their emotions, it is never too late to turn things around for the better,” says Dr Phillip.

“When parents can work through their transition into solo parenting easier, with support, they are simply better parents to their children.

“They can be kinder to themselves, less stressed and the hurt can dissipate faster.”

Dr Phillip says it’s best for therapists treating families going through separation to be experienced in dealing with both couples and children.

“Some therapists specialise in relationships, others in couples while some focus more on the children. I suggest parents look at the Counsellor they are seeking out for support to ensure they are qualified in these specific areas.

“Separation is often a devastating event for most kids, but it can be made so much easier to manage if the parents place the children as a priority instead of themselves, their own feelings, and their wants

“It is about the kids.”

