The Family Law System

Parenting After Separation

Australian Government

Family Law PATHWAYS NETWORK

SOUTH AUSTRALIA

The SA Family Law Pathways Network is a coordinated network of organisations and professionals operating within the broader family law system in South Australia. The goal of the Network is to foster dialogue and collaboration between service providers with a view to assisting separating and separated families' access to services. Network members meet regularly and work together on sector-wide collaborative projects.

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For further information please see the SA Family Law Pathway's Network
Website: www.pathwaysnetworksa.com.au

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South Australian Family Law Pathways Network
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Contents

Introduction – parenting after separation

Parenting after separation is often more challenging than parenting in intact families. Parents cannot support and complement one another in the same way, communication and cooperation may be strained, finances stretched and the dynamics of stepfamilies are one of many additional complexities.

Separation as a life event is also intensely distressing for those involved. Children tend to be deeply affected by family breakdown, while parents must adapt and parent effectively amidst their own grief and distress. When conflict is added to this mix, the challenges for all concerned become increasingly difficult.[1]

The parenting information contained in this booklet is drawn from a combination of research, input from separated children and parents, and contributions from experienced practitioners. Acknowledging that all separated families face their own individual challenges, this booklet seeks to provide some general insights regarding parenting after separation.

Are there some positives?

If provided with support and protected from conflict, most children adjust well to separation.[2] Children from separated but conflict free homes also tend to fare better than children who remain in families marked by violence or conflict.[3]

Children's relationships with their parents may also improve after separation. Some parents assume more of a hands on role and become closer to their children in the process.[4] In the long term, parents freed from conflicted or abusive relationships also tend to be happier and more available to their children.[5]

[1]McIntosh (2003)
[2]Emery (1999)
[3]Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan (1999)
[4]Butler et al (2003)
[5]Butler et al (2003)

Separation and its potential impact on children

By the time children are in high school, more than a third will have a parent living in a different home.[1]

- Australian Bureau of Statistics (2023)

Short of the death of a partner or parent, divorce is among the most stressful life events an adult or child can experience.[2] While most children adjust well with good support, many children are severely traumatised by the separation of their parents and what follows.[3] Such children may struggle academically, emotionally, behaviourally or in their relationships, often for many years and perhaps a lifetime.[4]

How children cope with separation is influenced by a range of factors. These include the level of support they receive from parents, family and friends, their natural resilience, and how severely the separation impacts on the family financially.[5]

The most decisive factor for children however is the level of conflict between their parents. If parents can manage their conflict effectively and cooperate for the sake of their children, children fare well. If parents become mired in conflict and hostility by contrast, children suffer and invariably face an increased risk of short and long term harm.[6]

The importance of supporting children and managing conflict is crucial for children's wellbeing. The University of Queensland[7] found: "While the average effect of parental separation is small, children of separated parents have twice the rate of serious mental health problems and substance abuse, and are twice as likely to attempt suicide, as children of parents in intact families. These statistics reflect that a minority of children from separated parents have very poor adjustment.

AIFS reviewed many studies of children in Australia and identified that the poorest outcomes of all were for children facing significant violence or abuse from a parent.[8]

[1] Families and family composition (August 2023)
[2] Holmes & Rahe Stress Scale
[3] Amato (2000)
[4] Amato (2000)
[5] Kelly (2000)
[6] Kelly (2000)
[7] How Divorce will affect my kids (University of Queensland 2018)
[8] AIFS 2020

Three models of post separation parenting[1]

Parenting after separation tends to fall into one of three categories: cooperative parenting, parallel parenting and conflicted parenting.

Cooperative parenting – trust and communication

Cooperative parents have had success working through their emotions and are able to communicate calmly and constructively. They can discuss their children's needs and reach joint decisions about important issues such as schooling. Cooperative parents tend to implement their parenting arrangements more flexibly and can readily review their agreements as circumstances change. They resolve their disputes through discussion and, typically, without recourse to court proceedings or other external assistance.

Parallel parenting – truce and structure

Parallel parenting is an effective strategy for separated parents prone to conflict. Clear parenting arrangements are established to reduce disagreement and unnecessary communication minimised to avoid arguments. Parallel parents recognise the importance of protecting their children from conflict and supporting their child's relationship with the other parent. Services may be called on to assist with changeovers or mediate disputes as needed.

Conflicted parenting – intense emotions and vulnerable children

When separated parents become locked in conflict, parenting suffers, children suffer and the trauma of separation is intensified for all concerned. It can be especially challenging for separated parents to be angry and defensive towards one another and clearly focused on their children's best interests at the same time. The basic objective for conflicted parents is to resolve their practical disputes and work towards a parallel or more cooperative parenting model over time.

Parent exercise: appreciative orientation

- List your best strengths and qualities as a parent?
- In what ways are you working well with the other parent?
- What are you already doing to effectively manage the stress in your life?
- How might life be different if you had an improved relationship with the other parent?
- In what ways would this benefit your children?
- What is the smallest thing you could try right now to bring about positive change?

[1]McIntosh (2003)

Resolving disputes

Resolving disputes about parenting, property and child support is the critical first step in defusing conflict and moving forward. Three basic approaches to resolving disputes are available to separated parents.

Working things out in private

Many separated parents resolve their issues, particularly their parenting arrangements, through private discussions. Given that separated parents may be sharing responsibility for the care of their children for many years, a capacity to communicate and cooperate in this manner is the ideal.

Using mediators and other professionals to assist

Mediators assist separated parents to reach agreement about parenting, property and other matters.[1] Parents retain control over any decisions made and the process tends to be more flexible and less costly than going to court. Mediation is a form of professionally assisted negotiation. It is a middle ground that offers certainty and formality without the stress and divisiveness of an adversarial court battle.

Contested court proceedings

Contested court proceedings are often necessary for cases that are highly complex or involve issues such as domestic violence or child abuse. The Courts also have a key role to play in connection with consent orders, urgent applications and other related matters. At the same time, the Family Law Act explicitly encourages separated parents to develop their own parenting arrangements and to "use the legal system as a last resort rather than a first resort" (section 63B). Even where legal proceedings have already commenced, parents should continue to explore whether mediation or other forms of alternative dispute resolution may be effective.

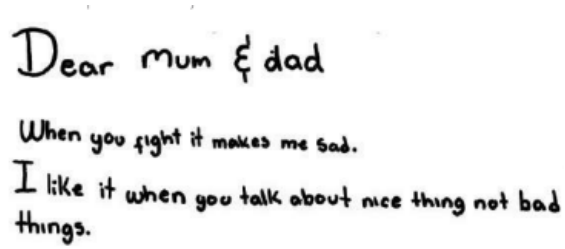
[1]Mediation (family dispute resolution) is an established part of the family law system and is widely available to separated parents at no charge or minimal cost. Subject to certain exceptions, e.g. where family violence is an issue, parents need to attempt mediation before applying to the Family Law Courts for orders in relation to their children; see s60I of the Family Law Act (1975)

Speaking to children about separation[1]

Speaking to children about separation can be difficult. Parents may be unsure about what to say or whether speaking to their children may do more harm than good. Children for their part may avoid asking questions out of concern for their parents or uncertainty about the response they might receive.

While there is no standard approach, it is widely accepted that children benefit from being spoken to about separation in a timely, honest and age-appropriate manner.

- Parents should be honest with their children about the separation and what might follow. A child's capacity to draw stability and support from their parents is built on trust.
- At the same time, communication should be age appropriate, and judgment exercised about what children need to be told. Court proceedings, money problems and accounts of your ex's failings, are often things children need not be exposed to.
- It is important to encourage all children to be open about how they are feeling. Parental support is critical, and ongoing discussions may assist children to correct their thinking or manage their emotions.
- Younger children may become lost in their thoughts and may blame themselves for the separation. It can be critical to reassure younger children that the separation – and any conflict – is not their fault and that both parents still love them and are there to support them.[2]
- In some cases, speaking to children about the separation may help the parent child relationship, particularly with older children. Understanding why the separation occurred may help a child forgive a parent and move on.
- Children typically benefit from being told about changes to their living or other arrangements before they occur. Knowing what to expect and preparing for the change can help children adjust.



Girl aged 9
– Banana Splitz Program, Anglicare SA

[1]Based on Butler et al, 2003 and Parenting SA: Parent Easy Guide #6
[2]Hetherington et al (1989)

The importance of children enjoying close relationships with both parents

If there is a lack of contact between a parent and child after separation, the child may attribute this to a damaged relationship or a lack of love. In particular, young children may find it hard to think of other reasons.

Children generally benefit from maintaining close relationships with both parents after separation.[1] This may not be appropriate where there is domestic violence or child abuse. Leaving any more subtle considerations aside, children love both parents and each has something to offer.

For children of all ages, regular contact should be established with both parents as soon as possible after separation – a breakdown in contact with one parent immediately following separation is not uncommon. With infants and younger children, visits should occur regularly and should match the child's routines.[2] As children get older, longer visits, regular overnight care and consultation with children about their wishes become increasingly important.

When developing 'time spent with' arrangements, parents should be practical and should carefully consider what will work best for their children.[3] Once implemented, parents should monitor how their children are coping and should adjust their arrangements accordingly. Trialling new arrangements for a period of time to see how a child copes or gradually increasing the frequency and duration of visits may be beneficial.

It is important to emphasise the critical role that each parent plays in fostering their child's relationship with the other parent.[4] Each parent wields enormous power in this regard and while the right thing to do may be obvious, the challenge of remaining positive and encouraging a child's relationship with the other parent may be difficult.

The goal when developing parenting arrangements is to…Balance time and responsibility in a way that best suits children's temperament, level of resilience, developmental stage and age, and that best suits each parent's work responsibilities, personal capacity and strengths.

– Bruce Smyth (2009)

[1]Davies & Cummings (1994)
[2]McIntosh et al (2009)
[3]Smyth (2009)
[4]Hetherington and Stanley Hagan (1999)

Children's experiences of separation

The following table was developed in a group exercise with 20 separated parents participating in the Anglicare SA's KidsAreFirst Parenting Orders Program (ex-partners attend different groups). The parents were separated into three groups (based on the age of their children) and were asked to discuss how their children had experienced the separation.

Age 0–2 years		
Physical responses	• Quiet • Withdrawn/disconnected • Diarrhoea • Crying • Desensitised • Sleep problems	• Separation anxiety • Vomiting • Clingy • Insecure • Problems with eating • Unable to calm down
Thoughts and emotions	• Distressed • Ripped in half • Needing touch and affection • Needing reassurance	• Freaked out • Startled • Unsettled • Confused
Changes and losses	• Different home • Different environment • Less time with extended family • Split family • Lack of stability • Disrupted routines	• Loss of pets • Loss of toys • Adjusting to a parent's new partner • Less time with parents • Nothing the same
Helping/protecting them	• Tell them you love them • Routines • Reliable and consistent care/responses	• Consistent firmness

Age 3-5 years		Age 6+ years	
• Storm • Tug of war • Split in half • Shut down	• Drained • Exhausted • Tired	• Sick • Butterflies • Eczema • Skin disorders (stress) • Allergies • Sweaty (nervous)	• Sore tummy • Headaches • Angry outburst • Tense • Hot • Flushed
• Unable to express oneself • Brain exploding • Lost • Insecure	• Sad • Scared • Anxious • Unloved	• Needing to please • Powerless • Uncertainty • Longing • Fantasies (e.g. of reunion) • Growing up quickly	• Afraid and sad for parents • Lack of trust • Alone • Dishonest with self and others • Having to be adult
• Two houses • Different food • Different toys • Different rules • Two families	• New siblings • New step-parents • Parents and other family members now bad guys	• New food • Step-parents • Made to feel guilty/ bad about loving mum or dad • Unable to share happiness with other parent	• Less contact with parents • Different school • Childhood cut short • Exposure to conflict • Different activities
• Talk to them • Listen to them • Coming down to their level • Providing choices and options	• Accommodate their needs • Including children in planning • Play with them	• Work out love language and provide love in that way • Parents sharing information about children • Make things feel special	• Fathers doing “man stuff/play” with their children • Creatively turning a difficult situation in to something fun or positive

Parenting after separation – general advice regarding children of all ages

Be patient, understanding and supportive

Separation is a traumatic experience for children and parental support may be particularly important in the period of emotional crisis that typically follows family breakdown. Younger children may react to separation by regressing in their toilet training, feeding or other behaviour. Such missteps should be handled with patience and understanding as they are a natural reaction and will pass with time. Older children may react with intense emotions ranging from anger to depression, while acting out with bad behaviour is not uncommon.[1] Children need their parents at this difficult time and skillful and committed parenting can be especially beneficial.[2]

Maintaining continuity and reducing additional burdens

Placing additional burdens on children in the aftermath of separation, e.g. moving house or changing school, makes it harder for them to cope. Children should ideally be provided with as much continuity as possible.[3] This may include staying in the same home or school, or continuing to pursue their same sporting or other extracurricular activities. Children may also benefit from maintaining traditional family routines such as a weekly dinner with the grandparents.

Be positive about your child spending time with the other parent

Separated children are highly perceptive about their parents' attitudes and feelings and parental conflict affects them deeply. A critical issue parents need to be mindful of is how they approach their child spending time with the other parent.[4] Is the child supported and encouraged to spend time with the other parent, or is such contact discouraged, sabotaged or made to feel like a betrayal?

As an example, think about how parents typically approach their child's attendance at school. The benefits of education are consistently praised, parents buy school books and stationery and help their children prepare, children are dropped off at school with a smile and warm encouragement and are received home with joy and questions about their day.

Parents recognise education as important and instinctively know that children, particularly younger children, benefit from support and encouragement. Though more of a challenge, these same principles apply to post separation parenting and simple things like being civil at changeovers or sharing a child's happiness after a visit, support both the child and that child's valuable relationship with their other parent.

[1]McIntosh et al (2009)
[2]Davies and Cummings (1994)
[3]McIntosh et al (2010)
[4]Hetherington and Stanley Hagan (1999)

Be mindful of the things that help children cope with separation[1]

- Speaking to children about the separation and how they are feeling.
- Treating each child as an individual and focusing on their needs and best interests when making decisions.
- Providing children, particularly younger children, with stability and routine.
- Consulting with children, particularly older children, about parenting arrangements.
- Being flexible and child focused when implementing parenting arrangements.
- Minimising parental conflict and not discussing adult issues such as money or court proceedings around the children.
- Where different rules apply in each household, respecting these differences and making sure children and parents are aware of them.
- Supporting children to have time with friends, extended family and other people who can support them.
- Keeping promises, particularly around spending time with children; trust is crucial.

Parents also need to be mindful of their own health and wellbeing and to reduce conflict and distress for their own sake. Parents under strain do not parent as effectively as they otherwise might.

[1]Adapted from McIntosh, 2003 and Parenting SA: Parent Easy Guide #6

Information regarding children of particular age groups

Infants – Birth to age 2[1]

- Infants are heavily dependent on their parents and require warm responsive care that meets their basic needs. Routines around feeding and sleeping are particularly important. They should be taken into account when developing parenting schedules and maintained across both households where possible. Issues such as breastfeeding or a child's capacity to settle in unfamiliar surroundings may also need to be considered.
- Parents should support their infant's care by communicating about issues such as their mood, health, feeding and sleeping patterns. If speaking directly is not viable, other methods such as SMS, communication book or phone app may be suitable.
- Infants cannot self soothe (calm themselves down) and rely on their parents to regulate their emotions for them. Parents should carefully monitor the stress levels of their infants and how they are coping with any new arrangements.
- Regular contact of limited duration is ideal for building strong relationships between an infant and their non-residential parent. The special case of sharing the overnight care of infants is addressed further at pages 20-21.

We have some good indications now that weekly overnights are too much of the wrong kind of contact for many young children….there is a special vulnerability about night time. The state of the organism is to be more anxious at night. That is hard-wired in our cortisol rhythms.

- Judith Solomon, in George et al (2011)

[1]Adapted from McIntosh et al, 2009 and McIntosh (2011)

Toddlers - Age 2 to 3

- Toddlerhood is a time of increasing self-awareness and independence, including the "No" and "Why" phases. Tantrums and oppositional behaviour are natural and may not necessarily be linked to separation or the conduct of either parent.
- Toddlers may become particularly distressed at changeovers and these transitions can be a trigger for conflict. Parents may wish to develop a careful strategy for minimising stress and conflict at changeovers, e.g. when and where changeovers will occur, who will be involved, allowing the child to take a comfort toy with them etc.
- Regular overnight care may become more appropriate as a child emerges from infancy, particularly if the relationship between the child and the non-residential parent was well developed prior to separation. At the same time, a toddler's memory, communication skills and sense of time are still developing, and shorter more regular visits may be more appropriate than visits that are longer or more widely spaced apart.[1]

The experts tell us that repetitive stress is not good for young children – it puts at risk their sense of the world being a safe and secure place and can lead to anxiety and even depression. If a young child is difficult to settle, clingy or withdrawn for prolonged periods, either in the non-resident parent home or on return to the resident parent, it is highly likely that the infant is overly stressed.

Repetitive stress can lower a child's stress threshold, so the tiniest thing will upset the child. There might be nightmares, regressive behaviours such as bed wetting in a toilet trained child, excessive clinginess, frequent tears, unexplained aggression, poor appetite, or uncharacteristic behaviours such as a general loss of enthusiasm for play.

- Federal Judge Robyn Sexton (2011)

[1] Australian Association of Infant Mental Health Inc (2012)

Preschoolers – Age 3 to 5[1]

- The preschool years are a time of rapid growth in communication, exploration and understanding. A stable conflict free environment frees up the mental space young children need for optimum learning and development.
- Frequent contact with both parents without long breaks remains important for preschoolers. Contact in between visits by phone or other means, e.g. online.
- Preschool children are more aware of birthdays, Christmas and other special occasions and these events need to be taken in to account when developing "spent time with" arrangements. Preschool children may benefit from using a simple calendar to help them understand when they will next see each parent.
- Preschoolers typically harbour fantasies of their parents reuniting – as do many older children – and live in a world rich in imagination. It can be especially important to explain separation and its meaning to young children in careful and age appropriate language.[2]
- Preschoolers are egocentric by nature and may blame themselves for their parents' separation or conflict.[3] They can develop intense fears of rejection or abandonment or may believe it is up to them to look after their parents. Preschoolers generally benefit from reassurance that the separation did not occur because of them and that their parents love them and will always be there for them.
- Preschoolers mirror their parents' behaviour and attitudes with great precision and little discrimination. Being a calm and respectful role model is especially critical at this juncture.

[1]Adapted from multiple sources including "What About the Children" (Relationships Australia); chatfirst.com.au; Parenting SA: Parent Easy Guide #6
[2]Hetherington et al (1989)
[3]Hetherington et al (1989)

Primary school children – Age 6 to 12[1]

- School aged children tend to be affected by separation in more mature and complex ways than younger children. Their patterns of thinking and communicating become more sophisticated and services such as counselling or post separation children's groups emerge as options to help them.
- School aged children often become adept at telling each parent what they want to hear, either to protect the parent or avert a negative reaction or both. Pausing to reflect on this tendency may help separated parents respond most appropriately to their child's words and behaviour.
- Consultation with children about their preferred arrangements becomes increasingly important as children develop – although children should never be put in a position of having to choose between their parents. Shared care arrangements tend to be most common during the primary school years.
- A school aged child's friendships, studies, sporting pursuits and other activities constitute an important source of support and stability post separation. Parents should avoid disrupting these activities and should take them into account when developing parenting arrangements.
- It may also be important to accommodate a child's friendships and other interests when spending time with your child, e.g. to let them have a friend over during a visit. Spending time with each parent should be natural and rewarding and should not be experienced as an intrusion or loss.
- School aged children may become highly protective of one or both parents and deeply concerned about practical issues such as money or emotional issues such as fairness and loyalty. They often become a separated parent's rock or confidant and may frequently place their parents' needs above their own. Such children may benefit from reassurance about their parents' well-being and a shift in focus towards their own needs.

[1]Adapted from multiple sources including "What About the Children" (Relationships Australia); chatfirst.com.au; Parenting SA: Parent Easy Guide #6

Adolescents - Age 13 to 18[1]

- The teenage years involve a progression away from family and dependency and towards adulthood and autonomy. While adolescents are likely to be saddened and distressed by separation, their needs and responses may be very different from those of younger children.
- Adolescents' lives tend to be orientated around their peers, education and extracurricular activities. These pursuits are of great importance in their lives and constitute a valuable source of support and stability post separation.
- Consulting with adolescents about their preferred living arrangements can be particularly important. Arrangements need to be practical and should accommodate a teenager's interests and pursuits. Implementing arrangements flexibly and giving adolescents a greater measure of day to day freedom may be beneficial.
- Adolescents tend to apply their keen sense of justice to their parents' conduct pre and post separation. They may judge their parents' actions harshly and may come to take sides of their own initiative. Listening to teenagers, respecting their rights and views, and communicating with them effectively can be critical.
- Adolescence is a time of significant change and turmoil independent of separation. The highest rates of mental health issues, for example, occur amongst teenagers and young adults (ABS 2007) and separation is a major risk factor for children and adults alike.

Warning signs your teenager is struggling may include: a significant change in school performance; an inability to cope with regular activities; marked changes in sleeping and eating habits; physical complaints; depression; abuse of body (alcohol, drugs, self-harm); outbursts or aggression; threats of running away from home; and unusual thoughts or feelings, including being distracted or "not with it".

- Catherine Boland (2011)

[1]Adapted from multiple sources including "What About the Children" (Relationships Australia); chatfirst.com.au;

Bill of rights for children of separation and divorce

Every child has the right
To express love for both parents
Not to be placed in the position of message carrier
Not to be asked to be the family spy
Not to be told negative information about their parent or parent's family
To remain connected with both parents' families
Not to be interrogated after a visit with the other parent
To express or not to express his or her own feelings
Not to be exposed to conflict with the other parent
To a safe and stable environment
To remain a child and not a parental confidant
To be told in advance about family changes, such as moving house or a parent remarrying
Not to feel responsible for their parents' divorce
To be loved unconditionally

- Adapted from: The Truth about Children and Divorce, Robert Emery (2006)

Attachment and the overnight care of young children

Infants are highly dependent on their parents and instinctively bond to their first principal carer. This natural bond or "primary attachment relationship" serves a number of important functions during infancy, and, in doing so, acts as a key foundation for the child's lifelong social, emotional and mental development.

Key functions of the primary attachment relationship during infancy[1]

- Infants cannot self-regulate and rely heavily on their primary carers for comfort and soothing. A consistent pattern of calm soothing care builds the brain pathways a child will utilise to manage stress and emotion throughout life.
- Primary attachment figures offer infants a haven of comfort and security – a "secure base". Having a trusted and predictable presence to run to when scared or seek comfort from when hurt, helps young children play and explore with confidence. These early interactions form the foundations of a child's self esteem and sense of purpose.
- An infant's bond with their primary attachment figure acts as the template and foundation for all other interpersonal relationships. A secure attachment relationship in infancy helps a child develop close relationships with other family members during early childhood, and intimate and trusting relationships throughout life.

For infants, having a primary adult who is caring for them in sensitive ways, one who can perceive, make sense of, and respond to their needs, gives them a feeling of safety. The sense of well being that emerges from predictable and repeated experiences of care creates … a "secure base".

This internal model of security enables children to develop well and explore the world around them. Secure attachment is associated with a positive developmental outcome for children in many areas, including social, emotional, and cognitive domains.

– Dan Siegel and Mary Hartzell (2003)

[1]Adapted from Levy and Orlans (1998)

The danger of disrupting attachment during infancy[1]

The functions of attachment during infancy, and the lifelong foundations laid during this first critical period, are something separated parents need to be mindful of when developing their parenting arrangements. Prolonged separation from their primary carer and intense separation anxiety are two key factors that may disrupt secure attachment. Such disruption may have far reaching adverse consequences that deeply affect a child's social functioning and psychological well-being throughout life.

Evaluating the viability of regular overnight care for infants and toddlers[2]

Separated parents should approach the possibility of sharing the overnight care of infants carefully and with the temperament and well-being of their child foremost in their mind. Putting aside the question of who is the primary carer, a rotating overnight care arrangement may, in and of itself, be highly disruptive to an infant with limited communication skills and little grasp of time or permanency. While each child and family is unique, research suggests that regularly sharing the overnight care of an infant is problematic, even more so if two parents are in conflict.

Where the parents of a slightly older toddler or preschooler are looking at implementing a regular overnight care arrangement, a key factor to be considered is the warmth and strength of the pre-existing relationship between the child and the non-residential parent. If the non-resident parent, has been heavily involved in the day to day care of the child prior to separation, an arrangement involving regular overnight care may be more suitable.

While both parents may be able to soothe and support their child, infants are instinctively more receptive to one carer to begin with and may become extremely distressed if separated from them for extended periods.

Parents should not feel threatened by the concept of attachment or concerned they may miss out on a one time opportunity to bond with their child. An infant's primary attachment relationship plays a critical role during a key developmental period and provided this platform is laid, young children, through regular contact, will readily develop close and loving relationships with both parents.[3]

[1]Australian Association of Infant Mental Health Inc (2012)
[2]Australian Association of Infant Mental Health Inc (2012)
[3]Based on McIntosh (2011)

Parental Responsibility

Parents have legal responsibility for the care of their children. In separated families, where violence and abuse are not an issue, each parent will generally retain responsibility for important decisions.[1]

Where it is safe to do so, parents are encouraged to consult each other about major long-term issues in relation to the child, (for example, healthcare, education and religion), and make decisions in the best interests of the child.[2]

Parents must have regard to any kinship obligations, and child rearing practices, of the child's Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander culture.[3]

Parents do not need to consult on issues that are not major long-term issues. This will mean that the person with whom the child is spending time will usually not need to consult on decisions about such things as what the child eats or wears because these are usually not major long-term issues.[4]

Shared care parenting

The best interests of children[5]

The Australian family law system prioritises the best interests of children. This includes a child's immediate safety, welfare and happiness, and their long term development. When evaluating the best interests of a child, several factors are taken in to account:

1. what arrangements would promote the safety of the child;
2. any views expressed by the child;
3. the developmental, psychological, emotional and cultural needs of the child;
4. the capacity of a parent or proposed carer to provide for those developmental, psychological, emotional and cultural needs of the child;
5. the benefit to the child of having a relationship with a specific parent or carer or other person;
6. anything else that is relevant to the child's circumstances.

[1] Family Law Act (1975) s61C
[2] Family Law Act (1975) s61CA
[3] Family Law Act (1975) s61F
[4] Family Law Act (1975) s61DAB
[5] Family Law Act S60CC

When the Court is considering these factors, it must also consider any history of family violence, abuse or neglect involving the child or a person caring for the child, or any past or current family violence order. A family violence order is called by a different name in some states, for example it is called an "intervention order" in South Australia and an "apprehended domestic violence order" in New South Wales. Regardless of where the order is made it may be relevant to a decision of the Court made in any state.

Regarding an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child, the Court in considering the child's cultural needs must consider the child's right to enjoy their Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander culture and how an order might affect that right.

Shared care parenting arrangements

When considering shared care arrangements, the law prioritises the benefit to the child. In the majority of cases, it will benefit the child to have a relationship of some kind with each parent provided the child's safety can be assured. There is no concept of 'fairness' for parents, nor of 'parent's rights'.

"Although some people believe that the law entitles parents to spend equal time with their children, this has never been the case under Australian law. Parents should consider what arrangements are best for their child, in their particular circumstances".[1]

The paramount concern is the best interests of the child. Lawyers, family counsellors and mediators assisting parents and other persons regarding a child are required to inform the parent/s or other person that the best interests of the child are the paramount consideration. While shared care parenting arrangements are often agreed upon between parents, they will only be ordered by the court if they are in the child's best interests.

It is important to emphasise that 50/50 shared care arrangements are not a parental right or a default parenting arrangement and are often not suitable for the child. The best interests of a child may favour the child living primarily with one parent and having less time with the other. Shared care arrangements are not a one size fits all solution!

[1] https://www.ag.gov.au/families-and-marriage/families/children-and-family-law

Weighing a child's best interests

Families are infinitely complex and there are many factors to consider when deciding upon parenting arrangements post separation. Shared care arrangements may strike some parents and children as balanced and appealing but may appear highly disruptive to others.

Decisions regarding parenting arrangements must be carefully weighed and the best interests of the child or children teased out and considered. Where there is a history of domestic violence or ongoing conflict between parents, shared care arrangements may not be suitable.

In some cases, the Court may regard the risks to a child as so significant that a "no contact" order is made. The terms of a no contact order can vary widely, but usually such an order will provide for the child or children to live with one parent and not see or spend time with the other parent.

Some issues to be mindful of when considering shared care parenting[1]:

- The safety of the children and those caring for the child
- The age and developmental needs of the children
- The child's psychological, emotional and cultural needs
- Can the parents communicate and work with one another in a respectful and cooperative fashion
- Who is best placed to provide day to day care
- Special needs of the children, for example, medical and schooling
- How to ensure the children continue to enjoy their culture
- The child's right to enjoy their Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander culture
- Social needs of the children, for example, extra-curricular activities
- Do the parents live near one another
- Do the parents have the time and workplace flexibility necessary to make the arrangements work
- Is there support available from new partners or extended family
- How do the children feel about shared care
- The benefit of the child having a relationship with their parents and others of significance
- Is shared care being implemented for the children or the parents.

[1]Adapted from McIntosh et al (2010) and Family Law Act (1975) s60CC

My family has had a lot of changes but is still special because...

My family is still special because I am happy I have more People that love and care about me. I still have fun and my parent don't fight, they work out things for me but also let me choose what I want and put me firs before there problems

Girl aged 11
– Banana Splitz Program, Anglicare SA

Childhood learning and development in the context of separation

Children learn in a variety of ways. It may be useful for separated parents to think about how their conduct as parents, and how the environment they are creating, may be affecting their child's learning and development. When asked, essentially all parents say they want their children to grow up happy and fulfil their potential.

Learning by association

Children learn by making associations, in particular between outside events and how such events make them feel inside. If a child is regularly exposed to conflict and hostility, for example, they will begin to link the people, places and situations involved with the fear and distress they feel. These triggers accumulate and become more generalised over time and a child who is repeatedly traumatised may grow up to become anxious and hyper-vigilant.

Positive and consistent reinforcement

In behavioural terms, learning involves repeating actions that result in praise and reward and avoiding those that result in punishment or distress. Responding to children in predictable and consistently constructive ways tends to promote learning and development. Inconsistent and contradictory parenting by contrast can confuse a child and paralyse their progress.

Parents as role models

Children model themselves on their parents and will faithfully mirror the way their parents treat other people and react to life's challenges. Positive role modelling includes solving or managing long term issues in a reasoned and constructive manner.

Optimum brain development

A young child's rapid neurological development should ideally occur in optimum conditions of warmth, stability and attentive parental care. Conflict and distress taint this environment, scattering attention needed for learning, undermining healthy brain development and making it hard for a child to reach their potential.

Sensitivity to negative experiences

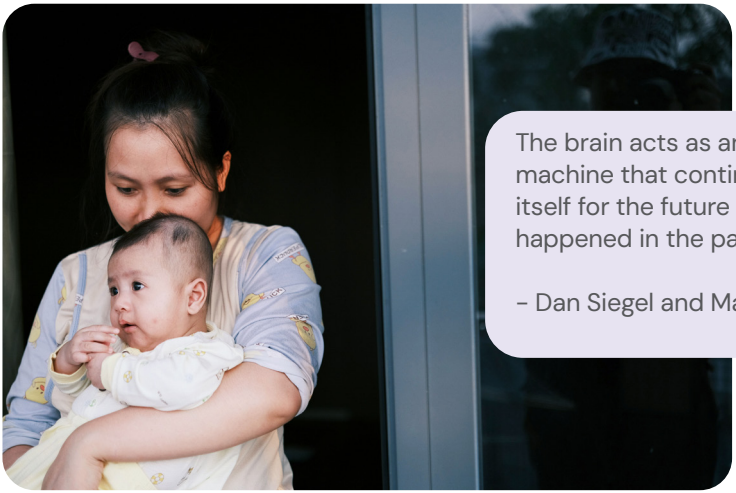
The human mind is intensely attuned to pain, fear, anger and sadness (threat and negative emotion). Parental conflict readily captures and holds a child's attention and imprints itself deeply upon their developing brain. Distressing experiences can have a disproportionately harmful impact on a child's development and psychological damage caused at a young age can be especially hard to undo.

Development of an internal working model[1]

Parenting establishes the core foundations for how a child views themselves, other people and life in general:

- I am loveable/unlovable, competent/helpless, successful/ unsuccessful
- Other people are trustworthy/untrustworthy, caring/hurtful, will stick by me/ will abandon me
- The world is safe/unsafe, I can relax and have fun/I need to be on guard and in control.

A child's early experiences become internalised as fundamental beliefs about their world. They create the personal lens through which each child will view and interpret life events, react to challenges and, ultimately, the degree to which they will succeed in life.



> The brain acts as an anticipation machine that continually prepares itself for the future based on what has happened in the past.
>
> – Dan Siegel and Mary Hartzell (2003)

[1] Levy and Orlans (1998)

Parenting in stepfamilies[1]

Parenting in stepfamilies is a delicate and complex challenge. Planning, communication and patient sensitivity to the needs and emotions of the children involved is critical.

A wealth of information about parenting in stepfamilies is available in books and on the internet. Stepfamilies' organisations exist in most states and courses for stepparents are run regularly. Parents looking for further information may wish to begin by visiting the Stepfamilies Australia website www.stepfamily.org.au

A planned and gradual transition

Meeting new partners and settling in to a new family structure is a major adjustment for separated children. Parents should think carefully about how and when they will introduce their children to a new partner and how they will manage the ultimate transitions. Some options for parents may include:

- Not immediately introducing their child to each new partner, i.e. making sure the relationship may be a lasting one first.
- Speaking to their child about a new partner before introducing them in person.
- Ensuring children and a new partner have met a few times before the new partner stays overnight.
- Gradually increasing the level of contact between a child and their new stepfamily before moving in together.

Consideration should also be given to how and when the child's other parent will be told about your new relationship. While this can be emotionally charged, remaining silent may force your child to lie, keep secrets or endure interrogation. This is a common example of how separated children may get caught up in the middle of their parents' issues.

Having realistic expectations

Close relationships built on love and trust take time to develop, even more so in a stepfamily context. Parents should therefore be prepared for confusion, jealousy, rejection and many other possible reactions as a child and their new stepfamily get to know one another. In some cases, close relationships between children and their stepfamilies never develop.

[1]Adapted from: Anglicare (SA) KidsAreFirst Program; and Parenting SA: Parent Easy Guide #7

Different needs at different ages

Children of different ages tend to react to stepfamily life in markedly different ways.

Toddlers and preschoolers tend to adjust relatively easily, their natural openness and simplicity fostering new relationships with less resistance.

School aged children often have more difficulty adjusting. Stepparents may be viewed as a threat to their time with one parent or as a replacement to the other. The intense emotions of school aged children may need to be managed with sensitivity.

The challenges of stepfamily life may ease off as children enter their teenage years. Adolescents have begun their transition towards independence and their friendships, schoolwork and other pursuits may act as a buffer to stepfamily life.

Communication

Communication in stepfamilies is of great importance. Children should be kept informed about upcoming changes and supported and encouraged to talk about their feelings. How a child will refer to a stepparent should be considered, and regular family meetings may be beneficial.

Discipline

Discipline in stepfamilies is a delicate issue and should be approached with planning and care. Some common tips include:

- Discipline should generally be left to the biological parent, particularly in the early stages of a relationship. Among other things, time is needed for children to develop trust and respect for a stepparent before accepting discipline from them.
- That said, a stepparent needs to be responsible for discipline when alone with their stepchildren. A biological parent explicitly transferring their authority to the stepparent may be effective in this situation.
- Parents and stepparents may also need time to work through their own approaches to discipline and develop a mutual strategy. As with all discipline, a united and consistent front is important.

Inside of me[1]

My mum and dad are inside of who I am
They are a part of me wherever I go
When they divorced they hated each other
And that was like they hated me
And when they hurt each other they hurt me
When mum did not want me to see dad she wasn't seeing me
When dad didn't want me to love mum he wasn't loving me
Now that's stopped and they get on OK
So I can be who I am, with my mum and dad inside me.

– Girl aged 11

[1]"Because it's for the kids", McIntosh, J. (2007) Family Relationships Online
http://www.familyrelationships.gov.au/www/agd/familyrelonline.nsf/Page/RWP42 DF911DCCD1263ACA257218001A4478

Post separation parental conflict

Negative patterns in conflicted relationships

Negative patterns established during a failing intimate relationship often continue or escalate post separation. Harsh communication, entrenched negative views and hair trigger reactivity are rooted in intense emotions and characterise many high conflict relationships.

The three patterns outlined below: toxic communication, biased perception and emotional reactivity, are based on the work of relationship expert John Gottman and are offered to promote constructive reflection.[1]

Toxic Communication

Toxic communication is characterised by a reciprocal exchange of harsh words and hostile body language. Verbal attacks and defensive responses follow one another as negative emotions escalate. Interactions typically start badly and never recover.

Lying at the heart of conflict is a sequential pattern of negative communication referred to by John Gottman as the "Four Horsemen".[2]

Some family conflict is normal, even in families that are not separated. However, children are affected, even into adulthood, by the intensity and duration of the parental conflict. Children who are caught in the middle of parental conflict often display aggression, behaviour problems and depression. Parental conflict can range from one parent berating the other, to vicious verbal attacks; from threats of violence to actual violence; or from subtle pleas for loyalty to explicit demands to openly side with one parent. All conflict hurts, and the more intense, pervasive, and open the hostility is, the greater the toll it takes on the children.

Many families experience a high degree of conflict, which routinely lands them back in court to solve what should be relatively simple problems. They are often unable to work cooperatively, as the goal of their disputes is to decide who is right and who is wrong. For some, the purpose is to gain or maintain control. For others, it is revenge.

- Family Justice Services (2009)

[1]Gottman (1999)
[2]Gottman (1999)

The Four Horsemen – The typical pattern of hostile communication

Criticism	Hostile communication typically opens with criticism; broad personal attacks "playing the person" rather than specific complaints about current issues. Criticism often takes the form of "you always" or "you never" statements, e.g. "You never arrive on time, you just don't care", or rhetorical questions such as "What's wrong with you" or "How can you treat your children this way".
Defensiveness	Where emotions are high, criticism will almost reflexively trigger a defensive response. Defensiveness constitutes an attempt to redress or defend oneself from a perceived attack. It typically takes the flavour of innocent victimhood, e.g. "That's not fair/true" or righteous anger.
Contempt	Contempt consists of any statement or gesture (e.g. rolling one's eyes) that demeans the other person. It may involve insults, mockery or disgust, and is considered to be the most corrosive of the four horsemen. Criticism, defensiveness and withdrawal all occur in healthy relationships (but are checked by empathy, positive emotion and repair attempts), but contempt is rare to non-existent.
Stonewalling	Stonewalling involves physical or mental withdrawal (shutting down). Stonewallers look away from the other person, do not speak, and will stubbornly refuse to accept what the other person is saying. Men have a strong tendency towards withdrawal and women can find this particularly challenging.

Biased Perception

Individuals in conflict expect the worst from the other person, see the worst and respond accordingly. Harsh attitudes become entrenched over time as each person accumulates evidence to support their beliefs and discounts experiences to the contrary. Those in conflict perceive and interpret each other's actions in predictably more negative ways than those in healthy relationships.

For example:

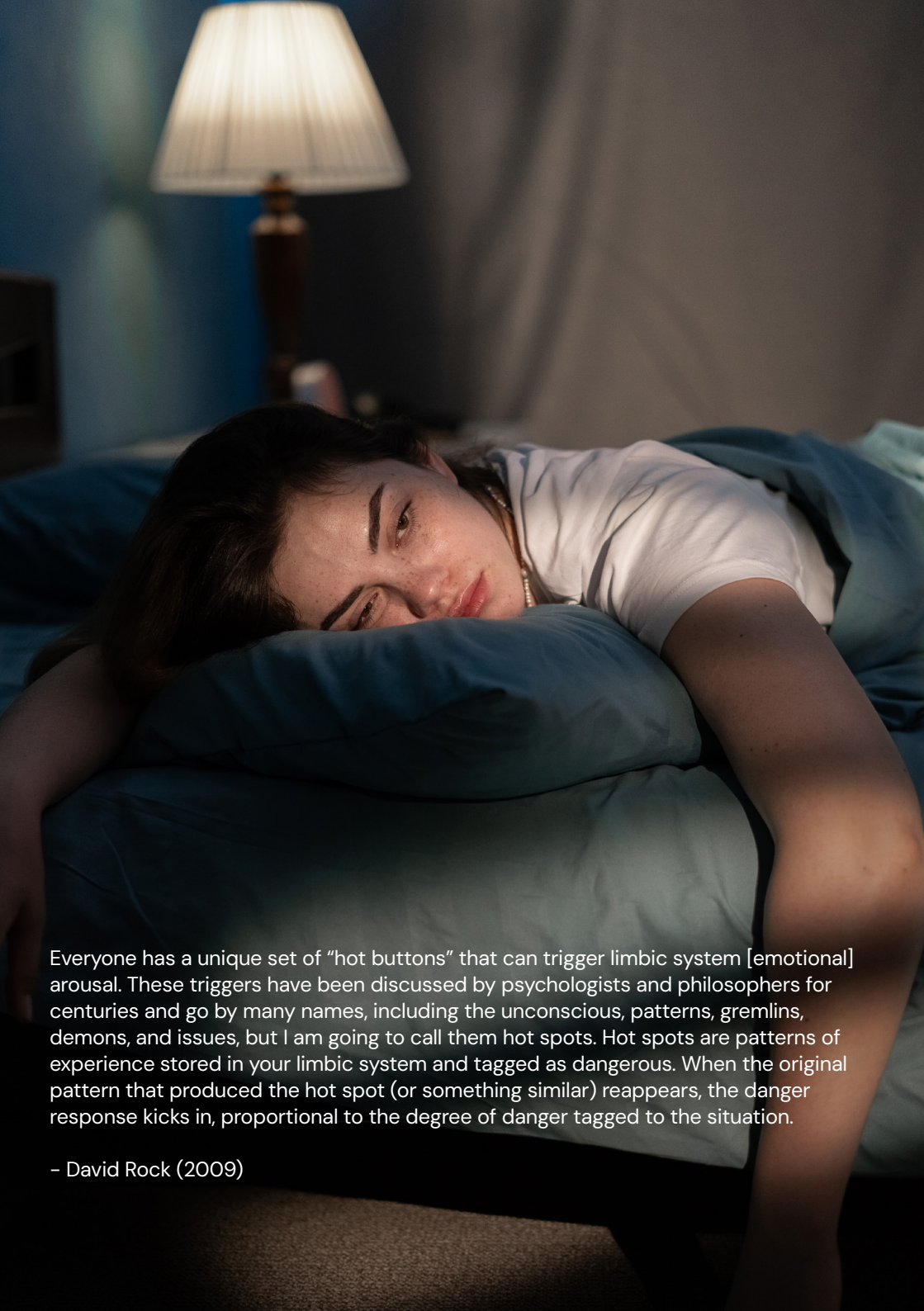
- Negative actions by the other person are taken more personally, e.g. "He deliberately arrived late to ruin my plans", while the motives of positive actions are questioned.
- External factors, e.g. "My car broke down", are discounted if actions are negative: "That's no excuse"; or are emphasised if the actions are positive, e.g. "He's only doing it because his lawyer told him to".
- Single negative actions are interpreted as enduring patterns of bad behaviour, e.g. "She never pays child support" or as proof of bad character generally. Positive actions by contrast are ignored or minimised and do not shake fixed negative beliefs.
- Negative actions readily evoke feelings of injustice, victimisation and righteous anger, e.g. "How could she do this to me". Positive gestures by contrast are likely to be received with little gratitude or appreciation, e.g. "I was entitled to that anyway".

Emotional Reactivity[1]

Emotions are part of human nature and are designed to prompt decisive (rapid) or resolute (committed and persistent) action. Intense negative emotions exert a strong influence on what we see and hear, how we process that information and how we respond. The combination of anger and resentment on the one hand, and simultaneous feelings of helplessness and uncertainty on the other (blended emotions), is highly distressing and can lead to the following pattern of emotional reactivity.

Perception	• We become sensitive to certain triggers, e.g. lateness, threats, the imperfect care of our children; "hair trigger reactivity" • Our attention is selectively drawn to threatening or insulting behaviour; other things are missed or harder to focus on
Processing	• Reason, judgement, creativity, thinking about consequences and impulse control are impaired • People and events are labelled in simplistic black and white ways • Past insults or negative experiences, and past patterns of negative thought may enter the mind
Reaction	• We may react quickly, aggressively and defensively ("without thinking") • We tend to become inflexible, instinctive and highly reactive to circumstances • Past patterns of behaviour may be triggered and repeated
Aftermath	• We tend to rationalise and excuse our actions in ways that are comforting to ourselves • We tend to selectively recall the events in a way that supports our views or position

[1]Adapted from Gottman (1999) and Rock (2009)



Everyone has a unique set of “hot buttons” that can trigger limbic system [emotional] arousal. These triggers have been discussed by psychologists and philosophers for centuries and go by many names, including the unconscious, patterns, gremlins, demons, and issues, but I am going to call them hot spots. Hot spots are patterns of experience stored in your limbic system and tagged as dangerous. When the original pattern that produced the hot spot (or something similar) reappears, the danger response kicks in, proportional to the degree of danger tagged to the situation.

- David Rock (2009)

Family violence, children and parenting after separation[1]

Family and domestic violence typically involves a pattern of degrading, intimidating and controlling behaviour of which physical violence may be a feature. It occurs largely in the family home and with significantly greater frequency and severity against women.[2]

Coercive control is a form of family and domestic violence that involves controlling behaviour by one parent towards the other, or towards another person and which may, for example, include a threat to harm a family pet. Such control can include the use of threats, emotional blackmail, or financial control to deprive the other parent of their capacity to make decisions and live life free of fear.

Family violence and children

"Children in families affected by family violence are less likely to be doing as well as those in families not affected." (AIFS, 2020)

Where family violence occurs in families with children, most children are exposed to the violence and all children, including babies, are affected by it. Many children see or hear the violence, some will intervene to protect a parent and others may comfort an abused parent in the aftermath of a physical or verbal attack.

Exposure to domestic violence is a highly traumatic experience for all children, most of whom have little capacity to shut out, escape from or understand what is happening. Children exposed to such violence may experience the impact of their experience well into adulthood, sometimes for their whole lives. Repeated exposure to violence can be especially harmful and is an established and notifiable form of child abuse (see for example the definition of child abuse under the Family Law Act).

"It is normal to disagree sometimes, however, high levels of conflict and animosity between parents places children at a greater risk of developing emotional, social and behavioural problems, as well as having difficulties with concentration and educational achievement."[3]

[1]Part of original text adapted from AVERTFamilyViolence.com.au with input from Dallas Colley, Domestic Violence Training & Consulting.
[2]ABS, 2006 in Attorney-General's Dept (2010)
[3]https://www.fcfcoa.gov.au/fl/pubs/conflict-effects-children

Family violence and separation

Separation strikes at the heart of an abuser's control, and violent behaviour often escalates around the time of separation. Separation is recognised as an especially high risk time for abused women and children for this reason.

Abusive and controlling behaviour often continues post separation through acts such as stalking and harassment, prolonging disputes, threats of violence, and moves to turn a child against the other parent. The continuation of abusive behaviour after separation can have a significant impact on parenting arrangements, changeovers, communication and the sharing of parental responsibility.

Protecting and supporting children where family and domestic violence is an issue

Protecting and supporting children after separation, and in particular finalising safe and workable parenting arrangements, can be a complicated matter.
Legal advice is important as is contacting a domestic violence service for information, safety planning and support. The National Domestic Family and Sexual Violence Counselling Service provides 24-hour counselling, information, advice and referrals.

Children's contact services are specifically designed to assist with changeovers where conflict or violence is an issue and counselling and support for children is widely available. Supporting children who have experienced violence, preparing them for situations that may arise, and offering them warmth and reassurance is critical.

Legal definition of family violence

For the purposes of the Family Law Act[1], "family violence" means violent, threatening or other behaviour by a person that coerces or controls a member of the person's family or causes [that] family member to be fearful.

The Act gives several examples of behaviour that may constitute family violence, including assault, sexually abusive behaviour, stalking, repeated derogatory taunts, damaging or destroying property including harm to animals, interfering with a person's relationships with other people, and depriving a person of financial autonomy or their liberty. Threats of these behaviours may also constitute family violence if they cause a member of the family to be fearful.

The legislation also recognises there may be some other behaviours which cannot be specifically defined, but could nonetheless be considered as 'violence' under the Act. The expanded definition takes into account the reality that family violence and the risk of family violence can be present in many forms – some of which may be less obvious and appear less pronounced, but still, have a significant impact upon those who have experienced or are experiencing family violence or those who are at risk of family violence.

Under the Family Law Act the definition of "abuse in relation to a child"[2] includes among other things "serious psychological harm" caused by family violence or exposure to family violence and is an established and notifiable form of child abuse.

[1] Section 4AB Family Law Act (1975)
[2] Section 4 Family Law Act (1975)

Checklist of parenting issues[1]

The following is a checklist of the types of issues commonly addressed in parenting plans and court orders. It is offered to assist separated parents with discussing and developing their own parenting arrangements.

When developing your parenting arrangements, take a step back, perhaps at the end, and ask yourself:

- If I were a child is this how I would like to live?
- Are these the arrangements that I need or that my child needs?

Living arrangements

Core residence and "time spent with" schedules taking into account the:

- Age and developmental needs of the children
- Feelings or wishes of the children
- Maintaining regular contact between children and parents
- Siblings being together
- Developing practical arrangements based around work schedules, school based changeovers etc.

Communication between parents and children when they are not together, e.g. phone, email, text messages, online messaging and parenting apps etc:

- What methods are acceptable
- When, for how long, how often etc.
- Will children be provided with a mobile phone for communication purposes.

Attendance/co-attendance at:

- School events, e.g. concerts, assemblies
- Sporting events, e.g. matches, training, award nights
- Extracurricular activities, e.g. musical performances, dance lessons.

Arrangements for special times known in advance, e.g:

- School holidays
- Public holidays
- Children's birthdays
- Parents / family members birthdays
- Christmas
- Easter
- Mother's Day and Father's Day.

[1]Adapted from multiple sources including the booklets: Parenting Plans, Putting Your Child First, a Guide for Separating Parents (cafcass) and Parenting After Separation, Participants Manual (Family Justice Services)

Arrangements for special times/events not necessarily known in advance, e.g. weddings, funerals, visiting a family member in hospital, special opportunities such as a concert or a sporting event:

- Agreement about the value of such experiences for a child
- The need to notify the other party in advance about such events
- Mechanism for making up lost time with children.

Extended Family

- Agreement about the value of contact with extended family
- The level of guaranteed contact
- The child's involvement in regular extended family events
- Roles extended family can play, e.g. in relation to child care, emergencies, changeovers etc.

Travel and holidays

- Agreement about the value of travel and holidays for children
- Travel to occur during periods where a child is already in that parent's care – where possible – and notification requirements either way
- Mechanism for making up lost time with children.

Alternative care arrangements

Parents relying on one another as primary back up in emergencies

- Role of extended family
- Childcare – which centre, who will pay etc.
- Use of babysitters and how will they be selected.

Changeovers

- Scheduling changeovers at appropriate times to facilitate a child's sleeping patterns and other routines.
- Neutral locations for changeovers may include:
    - Child care
    - Children's contact services
    - School
    - Homes of relatives or other third parties
    - Local playground
    - Police stations

- Personal conduct and communication during changeovers.
- Process to be followed at changeovers, e.g. giving the child some time and space to say their goodbyes.
- Feeding, bathing, toileting or other arrangements that should occur prior to changeovers.
- Items to be transferred at changeover, e.g. clothes, school uniform, homework, books and assignments, computers, sports equipment, musical instruments, toys and games etc.
- Process for notification if one parent is running late, e.g. phone call, phone app or SMS.

Sharing of parental responsibility

- Agreement about key parenting values, e.g. education, morality, setting an example, sport and lifestyle, religion, relationships etc.
- Is there scope for some common rules or routines, e.g. bedtimes, homework, chores, use of TV, internet and social media.
- Jointly dealing with important disciplinary issues, e.g. discussing important incidents to develop a mutual response.
- Respecting differences in parenting approaches and the authority of the other parent.
- Reaching an agreement about acceptable conduct in front of the children, e.g. parties, alcohol consumption etc.
- Leaving children alone, e.g. at what age, for how long, in what circumstances.
- Agreement that the other parent or their extended family will be contacted for assistance in emergencies, e.g. rather than leaving the child alone or with someone inappropriate.

Education

- Where will the children go to school
- How will schooling be paid for
- Level of each parents' involvement with the school, e.g. attendance at parent teacher nights, both parents to receive newsletters and report cards etc.
- Both parents to receive copies of children's work or to share children's work between each other
- What happens when children are sick
- Parents volunteering at school
- Responsibility for helping children complete their homework
- Use of tutors
- Transport to and from school, i.e. is the bus or train safe and age appropriate
- Providing school with documents such as parenting plans or restraining orders.

Sport, music lessons and other extracurricular activities

- Consultation re proposed activities
- Paying for activities and equipment.

Religion

Medical and dental care

- Will the child receive regular medical or dental checkups
- Who will be responsible for organising vaccinations
- Keeping each other informed about medical treatment or emergencies
- Contact numbers for one another in case of emergency
- Other issues such as piercings or haircuts.

Children's birthday parties and other special events

- How will these be planned and paid for
- Who will host them and how will this be decided
- Who can attend: parents, extended family etc.

Child's social life

- Discussing what is safe and age appropriate
- At what age can child go out alone, be left alone etc.

Communication between parents

- Acceptable topics and reasons for communication.
- Preferred times and methods for communication, e.g. the use of a communication book or phone app.
- What can and cannot be discussed in front of the children.
- Use of mediators, formal/informal (e.g. trusted friend), to facilitate discussions.
- Certain topics to only be raised or addressed in writing.
- Expectation of confirmation that a message has been received or of a prompt reply if appropriate.
- Taking notes so information can be discussed accurately.
- The provision of emergency contact details.
- Discussions about parents accessing support services, e.g. drug and alcohol support, counselling etc.

Mechanisms for resolving disputes

- Reviewing a parenting plan on a regular basis.
- Return to formal mediation on a regular basis or if certain disputes arise.
- Use of an informal mediator, i.e. trusted family friend, as appropriate.
- Parents to compile a list of issues as they arise, e.g. complications with parent teacher nights, who is to sign report card etc, and to address these promptly.

Supporting and communicating with children

- Not fighting or arguing in front of the children.
- Not denigrating the other parent in front of the children.
- Communicating with children about the separation, e.g. presenting a consistent and age-appropriate message about the reasons for separation and that the separation and any conflict is not their fault.
- Commitment to being positive and supporting the child's relationship with the other parent.
- Keeping children informed about changes in parenting arrangements and other important issues before they occur.
- Consulting with children about parenting arrangements, extracurricular activities etc.
- Reassuring children that money issues are not their concern and not exposing them to disputes about court proceedings, child support or other adult issues.
- What to do if children raise significant issues about their parenting arrangements or other matters.
- Children accessing counselling or other support services.

Finances

- Who will pay for what.
- Planning for the purchase of large items such as computers, driving lessons, musical instruments, bicycles etc.
- How will financial issues be discussed, e.g. any unexpected costs that might arise.
- What is the plan for property settlement.
- Discussion of child support obligations.
- How will money be transferred from one party to the other.
- The provision of pocket money for children.

National Helplines

Please call 000 if in immediate danger.

Service	Number	Information
Family Relationship Advice Line	1800 050 321	Information, advice and referral service for anyone affected by family relationship or separation issues. Mon-Fri 8am-8pm, Saturdays 10am-4pm.
Kids Helpline	1800 551 800	24 hours counselling, support and information for young people aged 5-25 years.
National Domestic Family and Sexual Violence Counselling Service	1800 RESPECT (1800 737 732)	24 hours counselling, information, advice and referrals for any Australian who has experienced or is at risk of domestic, family or sexual violence
Mensline Australia	1300 789 978	24 hours counselling, advice, information and referrals for men facing family, relationship, personal, health or other issues.
Lifeline Australia	13 11 14	24 hours crisis counselling and referral service.

Acknowledgements

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Australian Government

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