

## Age considerations after separation

Children react to separation according to their age. This behaviour can be alarming, but it is normal and will pass as the children adapt to the new situation. However, they will need extra attention, understanding and time to adjust. Therefore, ages need to be taken into account when considering parenting arrangements. What follows is a brief description of general reactions that you may expect from children at various ages.

### Infancy: Birth - 2 Years

The child in this age group is highly dependent on its parents. If one parent has taken on primary responsibility for caring for the child, it is likely that a strong physical and emotional dependence will have developed between the child and that parent. Lengthy or unexplained separation from that primary parent can be a source of intense emotional distress.

A child at this age has a very different concept of time than does an adult. For those small children, a few hours will often seem to be a very long time indeed. This needs to be considered when making contact arrangements. This child may fret for the absent parent with whom it requires frequent and short contacts to continue their relationship. Contact visits can be stressful and difficult for a child of this age, especially if there is a high level of conflict between the parents.

### Pre-school: 2.5-5 Years

Children become a little more independent of the parents. Separation is a major crisis for these children, and they can react with shock or depression. For instance, children in this group can show their distress by a change in sleep habits, toilet habits, deterioration in their language skills or 'regression'; i.e. they drop back in their development. They may become attention-seeking by being 'clingy' or through demanding behaviour.

They continue to differ from adults in how they perceive time. They have less time distortion than do infants, but still experience a short period as a much longer time than an adult. Especially if conflict between the parents is high, the child is unlikely to cope easily with overnight periods away from the primary care giver.

These children understand the world through very different thought processes than older children and it needs to be remembered that their fantasy life can be extremely rich. Therefore, you need to be cautious in your interpretation of comments your children may make.

### Children: 5-8 Years

Children in this age group are beginning to be able to talk of their feelings. They often have an intense wish to restore their parent's marriage and behave in ways to bring this about. They often wish to stay at home to be near their resident parent, and similarly feel reluctant to leave the non-resident parent at the end of a visit. They often exhibit behavioural problems which are noticed by friends, teachers and parents. These children have difficulty expressing their worries and communicate through difficult behaviour, or withdrawal.

Some children feel guilty, because they may blame themselves for the separation, as they are 'egocentric' and tend to believe that events revolve around them. This guilt can manifest in symptoms such as headaches and stomach aches, general feelings of illness, or disturbing nightmares.

### Children: 8-12 Years

Children in this age group more often can talk of their feelings, and experience separation and divorce as a severe loss. Their response could be an intense conflict over their loyalties to each parent. Sometimes if the conflict between their parents is high, they learn to cope with this by rejecting the non-resident parent. Children in this age group are beginning to experience the world outside their family and join groups like cubs and brownies and to attend birthday parties of their friends. Any contact visits need to take the child's activities into account so that the child has the opportunity of attending these activities, and hence, developing into a normal and independent adult.

### Teenagers: 12-16 Years

Adolescents are already becoming quite independent of their parents, even in a family that is together. Adolescents generally need to be given time and space to work out their own reactions to the separation and divorce. They are likely to react strongly with anger and rejection to pressure from either parent.

Sometimes adolescents can manipulate the conflict between their parents in order to resolve the issues of freedom and control central to adolescence, hence escape parental control.