

Family Feature:

Separation and Children: the impact of separated couples' high levels of conflict on their children.

I see quite a few families where the parents no longer live together, and where there is lots of fighting between them. Some parents believe their children are not aware of the animosity between them (even though they yell down the phone to each other), or believe that "kids bounce back". Neither is true.

Children experience a great deal when their parents separate. They do not simply "cope". Yes, children are resilient, AND they need their parents to put their needs at the top of the priority list. If you are constantly fighting it is important to keep it well away from children's ears. Do not use the children to spy on your ex-partner, or ask them to pass on messages: it is not fair to them. It is your issue, and you are supposed to be the grown-ups!

So how does it impact on children if you both bicker and are nasty to each other? They may regress to behaviours that they left behind some time ago: I have seen children in kindergarten begin to soil themselves; others begin to wet the bed or suck their thumbs. Older children may fall behind at school, move towards eating disorders or begin to mix with a "bad crowd". Some will refuse to co-operate on every possible occasion. Others will become withdrawn, depressed, or even suicidal.

All children are impacted: many will be resilient, able to use the extended family, friends and other resources to come through this time strong and happy. But a lot of it is up to you. You can refuse to engage in conflict. Yes! It can be done. But it means letting go of control. It means finding other ways to feel powerful, ways that do not harm your children. It can be useful to ask yourself why you need to be still engaged in the conflict? Is it just too hard to let go completely? You may need professional help if you are feeling bullied and trapped, or if you are being aggressive and acting in rage. This will help your children.

Remember that children learn what they see, hear and experience. Research shows that it is traumatic for children to see or hear violent behaviour. Because their brains are still forming, witnessing violence can affect them for life. They may become highly anxious adults, or helpless and needy in relationships; they may become bullies themselves. The government has been so concerned about what the brain research is showing that they are intervening more and more where children witness violence.

Children need to know their world is as stable and as even as possible during what is for them a sad and stressful time. Children grieve the loss of the family as it was, and it is important to actively give them space to talk about that. Some children respond well to drawings or play where they can express their feelings safely. It is important to be willing to hear their sadness, fear and anger.

See if you can settle on some short-term agreements so that you buy yourselves time to recover and be less heated. If possible, sit down together and tell the children you both love them and you want to help them through this time. If this can't be done, do it separately.

Remember, the children need you both. So ask yourself, "What am I doing to promote my children's relationship with the other parent?" This will develop their confidence and sense of security.

Make space and time for your children, put them first, and they will do well!