

STAYING INVOLVED AFTER SEPARATION

Being separated from your children is tough. It is the biggest challenge fathers face staying connected and involved in their children's lives. But it does not mean that you are any less important or less needed by your children.

LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

The initial groundwork depends on how well you can put aside your own anger, hurt or disappointment, and focus on negotiating parenting arrangements that are in the best interests of your children.

Fortunately, services like the Family Relationship Centres can help you work with your ex-partner towards the best possible outcomes.

There are two key aspects of staying involved in your children's lives following separation: making the most of the time you have with your children and finding a suitable way to manage your relationship with their mother.

GETTING INTO THE SWING OF SOLO PARENTING

For many fathers, the first time they have had sole care of their children for any significant length of time is after separation. It may take time getting used to having a one-on-one relationship with your children, especially if you have not been the main carer in the past.

In an effort to make the most of limited time, some separated dads fall for the trap of becoming an entertainer, taking their children on visits and outings. Yet the most effective way of staying involved is to immerse yourself in your children's daily care and activities: feeding, dressing, playing, homework, reading, sporting activities and school life. In fact, the need to assume more responsibility for their children's daily care gives many fathers an opportunity to strengthen their relationship with their children in ways that didn't occur before the separation. Taking sole responsibility for your children while they are in your care might involve a steep learning curve. Doing

this at a time of high disruption and stress doesn't make it any easier. Most dads in this situation could use some more support, so there's no shame in seeking it out. It helps to discuss your situation with others. Find out more about getting help in our information and services section (Page 14).

MANAGING YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR EX

Continuing the parenting partnership

Being separated does not dissolve a parenting partnership. There is still an ongoing need to negotiate the approach you'll take to parenting issues. Children benefit too, as they see their parents presenting a shared front, and being consistent in how they handle things.

Don't worry though, if you and your ex-partner have some different approaches to parenting – children can cope with differences, and even benefit from learning that some rules apply in some situations but not others.

Minimising your children's exposure to conflict

With time, many separated couples develop workable, even amicable relationships. While this may seem hard and a long way off in the beginning, it is important to work towards a workable relationship in the shortest time possible. It is especially important to limit your children's exposure to conflict between their parents.

Research shows that exposure to high level conflict is associated with trauma, increased anxiety and/or aggression in children. On the other hand, children get valuable life skills by watching adults work through their differences and solve problems.

Here are some tips for handling friction:

- If you need to have a difficult conversation with your ex, or you think the conversation could get a bit heated, try to do it somewhere or sometime when your children are not around.

- Try to stay polite and respectful in your dealings with your children's mother. Having brief conversations in public places like your child's preschool or childcare centre might make it easier to keep feelings in check.

- When you need to, speak to your partner directly rather than asking your children to deliver messages.

- Writing is an alternative if emotions are running high. Email, SMS or a home-to-home diary can help you share important information about your children.

- Keep the focus of your communications on your children's accomplishments and needs. Your children will feel reassured knowing that both parents are interested in their wellbeing.

- Avoid asking your children intrusive questions about their mother, or asking them to withhold information.

- Acknowledge your children's feelings and affection for their mum, and avoid criticising her in front of your children.

- Share the good parts of your relationship with your former partner.

- Talk to adult friends, rather than your children about any problems you are having with their mum.

- Perhaps talk with a counsellor, or ring a telephone counselling service such as Mensline.

Find out more about getting help in our information and services section (Page 14).

FATHERING FROM A DISTANCE

Caring for your children part-time does not make you a part-time Dad. Not living with your children doesn't mean you have to be cut off. Your children will always benefit from you knowing how things are going, being up-to-date with their interests and concerns, or just simply staying in touch. Telephone, emails, letters and SMS messages can help you stay in touch.

