

## **Divorce/Separation**

### **About separation**

It is often upsetting to children and young people when their parents are separating. It is a difficult thing to process and to understand, and this can easily result in feelings of grief, confusion, guilt, anger and/or frustration. The emotions a child or young person experiences as a result of a separation often seem contradictory to them, which makes it even more difficult for the child or young person to process and understand them. For example, a child might feel relieved that the fighting between their parents will end, but at the same time guilty about their parents separating.

How a child or young person will react to a separation of their parents can differ greatly, and there is no such thing as a 'usual' response. Many children get through the whole process relatively easily (of course this also depends on the situation and how the parents are handling things), whilst others struggle a lot more. Similarly, some children will change the most during the initial phase of the actual separation, and return 'back to normal' soon afterwards, while some children will only show changes in behaviour in the long run.

On top of the emotional impact, separations often force lifestyle changes upon the child or young person. They must adjust to only having one parent around at a time, and possibly even moving house or changing schools, etc. These lifestyle changes bring additional stress with them, and can make coping with the separation even more difficult.

Behaviour changes in a child or young person can be a common result of a divorce, and can occur immediately during the separation or start only later on. Because each separation is unique, and so are the children, the behavioural and emotional changes are also very varied. Some children might become withdrawn and tearful, whilst others might become frustrated and angry. You will probably find it helpful to look at the relevant section that deals with the specific behaviour that the child or young person in your care is showing, for example: anger, sadness, clingy behaviour, school refusal, low confidence.

### **Things to think about**

A separation of their parents is often a scary and difficult thing to cope with for all children, and on top of the emotional difficulty, often involves big lifestyle changes (such as moving house, going to a new school, etc).

There is no such thing as a 'usual' reaction of a child or young person to a separation, but quite often their behaviour does change in some way. You might notice the child or young person to become more withdrawn and tearful or you might see them being angry more often and starting to 'act out'.

It is also important to realise that a separation does not necessarily have to be a terrible thing for the child. It is not uncommon that some aspects of a separation are actually positive for the child or young person. For example, it could mean that their parents will stop arguing, which in itself can be a relief for the child or young person. It could mean that they get to spend more quality time with their individual parents. If they are moving house and school, it could mean a chance to meet new people and make new friends.

## Think about yourself

Your own moral attitudes and religious/cultural beliefs will influence your views on how a young person will be coping with parental separation. Also, your own experiences of how you or others have coped in this situation will have a bearing on how you respond. Being aware of these biases and responding to the individual child and their specific situation is the best way to be helpful.

For more information, see section on being aware of yourself and your own response.

## What you can do

- Try to talk to the child or young person about what is going on if you are in a position to do so. If you do so make sure that you are honest with them. However, at the same time do not place the blame or take sides with the parents in any way. For more information, see section on counselling techniques.
- Encourage the child or young person to express their feelings, whatever they may be. They might feel sad, angry, confused, frustrated. Bear in mind that these emotions can sometimes seem contradictory, so help the young person process them by letting them express themselves. Try to encourage the child or young person to talk about their feelings, but especially with younger children other ways of expression (such as art) can also work very well.
- Make the child or young person feel secure. Children and young people often blame themselves for the divorce and feel unloved as a result, so assure them that you care about them.
- If this is appropriate, try to get the child or young person to think about the positive things of the separation, and which aspects of their lives might actually be better now as a result, e.g. less arguing, their parents are happier, making new friends, and so on.
- Separations often involve a lot of lifestyle changes, so make sure that you stick to routines or create new ones as much as possible. This will also help the child or young person feel more secure by making their lives more predictable and stable.

## When to contact a mental health specialist

- If your attempt to help the child or young person has uncovered issues that you are inexperienced in dealing with, such as sexual abuse.
- If the specific behaviour that the child or young person is showing as a result is very extreme, or occurs together with other worrying behaviours.

## How to contact a mental health specialist

You should get in touch with your local health centre or hospital to obtain a contact number for the appropriate children and young people's mental health specialists.

Remember - you can contact your local mental health specialists for a number of reasons, for example:

- For advice on how to make a referral about a named child.

- For advice about whether or not to make a referral (it is normal practice to seek this advice without naming the child in the first instance).
- For advice about what to do (once again there should be no necessity to name the child).

By not naming the child you are protecting their right to confidentiality. This method of seeking advice also has the advantage that you do not need to get anyone's consent in advance of your contact phone call.