

PARENTAL SEPARATION AND ITS IMPACTS ON MENTAL HEALTH

A Guide for Parents With Children <18



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Definition

Parental separation occurs when a child lives in a household that does not include both parents.

This includes births into single parent households.

What does this look like?

- Divorce
- Absent Parent
- Parent Death
- Breakup



Common Reasons for Separation

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- A man with blonde hair, wearing a white long-sleeved shirt and blue pants, stands on the left. A woman with red hair, wearing a white sleeveless dress, stands on the right. Both are facing each other towards a central white box with a black border containing a list of reasons for separation.
1. Lack of commitment
 2. Infidelity/cheating
 3. Domestic abuse
 4. Basic incompatibility
 5. Financial issues
 6. Substance abuse
 7. Death/illness

Statistics

Divorce rates have been declining since 2000; however, they are still very common.



About one half of all American children under the age of 18 experience living with separated parents or single households.

Children of multiple parent divorces are considered to be “less pleasant” by their peers.

Children who are in families where the parents are separated tend to earn lower grades than their peers.

Overall, children of divorce are 20% less physically healthy (Parker, 2022):

- In terms of families in which only one parent is present in the child's life, the child is less likely to:
 - get vaccinated
 - have up-to-date yearly physicals
 - have dental check-ups

Childhood grief is associated with developmental disruptions, including relationship, academic, and career functioning.

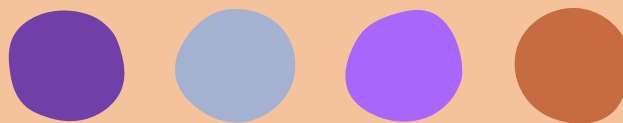


Child Mental Health Implications

Parental separation can be deeply traumatic to a child of any age. In many households, being raised by both parents in a healthy environment is beneficial to children. There are **physical, emotional, and educational** implications for children whose parents are separated.

Some Implications for children is that they can:

1. become insecure and withdraw themselves from social situations
2. behave destructively and dangerously for attention from parents
3. abuse substances as a means for escapism from their issues at home



D'Onofrio, B., & Emery, R. (2019). Parental divorce or separation and children's mental health. *World psychiatry : official journal of the World Psychiatric Association (WPA)*, 18(1), 100-101. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.20590>

Morin, A. (2022, December 22). The psychological effects of divorce on children. Verywell Family. <https://www.verywellfamily.com/psychological-effects-of-divorce-on-kids-4140170>

Keep In Mind

In some cases, growing up in a single-parent household might be beneficial:

- **Example:** if the relationship between parents is hostile, separating may promote a more stable environment for children to grow up in

Children in single-parent households can be raised in a healthy environment (Advice on page 10).

When parents separate, children:

- become more resilient
- develop effective coping skills
- bond with their parents in new ways

Advice for Parents



Experiencing separation from a partner can be hard and upsetting. Here is some advice to help you cope.

1. Seek social support from loved ones
2. Avoid power struggles with partner
3. Give yourself a break and practice self care
4. Keep to your normal routines as much as possible
5. Explore your interests



Fostering a Healthy Environment

How can you create a healthy environment for your children?

- Avoid fighting in front of children
- Avoid speaking poorly about partner in front of children
- Maintain routines for child (school, meal times, etc.)
- Invite children to share their feelings
- Try not to use children as messengers to communicate with partner



The Conversation

When going through separation with your partner, this is how you can approach the conversation with your children:



- Discuss implications with children
 - Did they lose a parent or are you mutually separating?
- Talk about what will change
 - Living arrangements, family dynamics, routines, etc.
- Listen to them when they talk about their concerns
- Encourage honesty
- Let them know that you will always love them no matter what
- Ensure them that they are not the cause of the separation

Advice for Children



As a child, you may struggle with the idea that the separation of your parents is “for the best”. Here is some advice:

- Talk about and express your feelings to your parent(s)
- Ask your parent(s) questions
- Journal about your feelings and express your emotions
- Understand that it is not your fault
- Know that your pain is valid



Journal Prompts for Children



★ 1. How did this make you feel?

★ 2. How has this experience

changed you?

★ 3. What are the positive

aspects of this change in

your life?

★ 4. What about this situation

hurts you the most?



What If...

- 1. Your partner starts fighting in front of the children.** Separate yourself from the situation and ask to move to another room.
- 2. Your children start to get physically aggressive at school.** Be open with your children, and invite them to share their feelings to develop understanding.
- 3. Your children become withdrawn.** Seek in-person therapy or methods of self-expression for children. This can be through art, journaling, sports, etc.
- 4. You are grieving the loss of your partner.** Seek social support from loved ones, identify helpful resources for your family.

Family Resources



Positive Parenting Through
Divorce

National Alliance for
Children's Grief



AACAP: Children and Divorce

Author's Note

Deciding to separate from your children's parent is a hard decision, and it is difficult to know how to navigate this change. It is important to be honest with your child about what is going on, but not to get too deep into the details as this is often traumatic for the child.

Discuss what this change means and how you will move forward (or not) as a unit.

It can be difficult, but make sure also to look after yourself. Figuring out this situation while also taking care of a child and making sure that their needs are met is a tough task.

There are many resources for families undergoing situations and hardships like this, so make sure to look into these if you find you are in need of help.