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Separation is not just about the parents:

Parent Plus

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Children feel effects of emotional turmoil too.

WHEN PARENTS separate it has an impact on the children of the couple. We know this to be true; what we can't predict as confidently is how much of an impact and how negative an impact it might have. Indeed, for example, we know some children experience relief when their parents separate.

There is a lot known about separation and its impact on children from numerous research studies. I have summarised some of what I believe are the key points to bear in mind in relation to children and separation or divorce:

Parental separation is not an event but a process. It begins long before a parent departs and continues throughout childhood.

All children experience emotions that can be difficult for them, but that they can cope with. In this respect, separation and divorce can be seen as a transition that children can and often do accommodate to.

It is important to make sure that children are told clearly what is happening and to listen, sensitively, to what children have to say about decisions which affect them.

Separation for children can be particularly difficult when followed by a number of other changes to the family setting, for example, where parents find new partners or where new children are brought into the household.

It is harder for children, and adjustment will take longer, when there is financial hardship and parental distress after separation.

It is difficult to establish successful arrangements for contact between the child and the non-resident parent when the parents remain in conflict after the separation.

Other factors, such as housing and working hours, can also be barriers to developing and maintaining contact between children and their separated parents.

Many children rely on informal support from friends and family to come to terms with the changes in their lives. Sometimes children need additional professional support, and that support must focus on their needs, not those of their parents.

A central theme for parents to take away from these research findings is the need to realise that their children are probably hurting in the midst of the separation. That hurt is sometimes practical and sometimes emotional. While many parents are aware of this at an intellectual level, most struggle to respond at an emotional level. This is because they, too, are hurting emotionally from the whole process of a relationship that has soured and ultimately led to them living apart.

Furthermore, parents need to realise that the separation is only a stage in the ongoing relationship they have with the father or mother of their children. Once children are involved, such parental relationships don't end; they just change. This, too, is difficult for parents to accept, given that the decision to separate probably felt like a culmination point. Instead it is just the starting point of the next phase.

It is comforting, however, to find that children are resilient and that they can accommodate to the changes in their family circumstances, as long as they are supported by friends and family. Children always need support to come to terms with their parents' separation, but it doesn't always need to be professional support.

It seems to me that as long as parents can realise that the separation is not just about them, but also about their children, then the family will continue to do well, and may even do better than ever.

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