

Coronavirus (COVID-19): Post separation parenting

TIP SHEET

Parenting and co-parenting after a couple have separated can be challenging and stressful at the best of times.

Now, in a time where the COVID-19 pandemic and social isolating are impacting on so many aspects of family life, separated couples who are co-parenting their children are facing additional stresses. Families are having to adapt and make difficult decisions in the face of heightened uncertainty and anxiety.



Here are some tips to help you adjust and adapt to co-parenting during COVID-19:

- **Understand that heightened tension and conflict is to be expected**
Many separated parents are facing changed circumstances, job losses, financial stress, and uncertain futures. The requirements for families to social distance at home, or

border closures means they are not able to maintain the usual routines and schedules, which make children sharing time between separated parents and two households manageable. This disruption to previously agreed parenting arrangements can lead to increased tension and conflict.

It may be helpful to understand that, under pressure, old hurts and resentments between separated parents may resurface and escalate as people find adjusting to the new circumstances difficult.

- **Resolve to co-operate with your former partner**
Now is the time to let go any of old grudges and bitterness with your former partner. Your children need to feel safe to love and have contact with both their parents, whether they get to spend time with them in the other home, or whether their contact is via the phone or video link. Try to put aside any differences you may have and to put the children's well-being first.
- **Review access arrangements**
In the light of the global pandemic, it can be helpful to stop arguing over whose day or weekend it is, and start talking about what arrangements make the most sense. This may mean

temporarily modifying aspects of existing parenting plans and regular schedules, in the best interests of the child. Children have a right to see both their parents, and at this time they need reassurance that their parents are both committed to their safety and wellbeing.



- **Accept the various parenting styles in the extended family system**
One of the factors in relationship breakdowns is often a difference in parenting styles. For example one parent may value flexibility and a gentle approach, while the other believes in firm boundaries and consistency. Co-parents in two households may also have very different views on how to deal with the COVID-19 recommendations for keeping safe.

After separation, and even more so after re-partnering, there are now even more opinions about what 'good parenting' looks like, and this is often a source of ongoing conflict between former partners. But this is the time to show children that you are able to work together so that they feel safe and loved by both parents.

- **Be aware of your children's feelings**

In these stressful times your children may be going through a range of feelings that they do not fully understand. Encourage them to share their feelings with you as often as they need to and ask them open ended questions to encourage them to open up. It's important to never minimise or dismiss their feelings, this will allow them to be honest with you. For young children it can be helpful to put a Feeling Faces chart on the fridge, encourage them to relate to an emotion.

- **Intentionally park the financial conflict**

The current economic challenges and uncertainties are likely to aggravate any tensions and conflict being experienced by separated couples, who may still be working through the financial settlement arrangements after separation. It may be helpful for both parties to acknowledge and accept that you are at an impasse, and that you are unlikely to find a mutually acceptable settlement without professional assistance at this time. It would be wise to declare a 'ceasefire', and come up with an interim solution for the

next few months. You can then make a plan to address this issue more formally when things settle down.



- **Spend quality time with children**

Ensure you make some time for pleasant family group activities. However, parents should also make time for one-to-one check time with individual children, to allow them to feel valued and cared for.

- **Modify expectations and make more allowances for 'mistakes'**

It is important for single parents and those in blended families to refocus on what really matters in family life, and to look for the positive in each other and the children. There are some benefits to all being at home together, with some of the pressures of time pressures for work, school and after school activities removed. Try to enjoy the less rushed pace, finding creative and fun ways to keep occupied. Relaxing some of the usual home 'rules' temporarily can make for a more relaxed and enjoyable atmosphere while you are all cooped up together.

- **Communicate effectively**

The way you communicate with the other parent can have a major effect on your children. Explain to your former partner the routines you are implementing in your household and invite ideas from them, making sure to answer without creating conflict.

It's also important to try to agree on a joint response plan should your children get any COVID-19 symptoms - use Australian Government endorsed information about guidelines

- **Focus on yourself**

During this time of COVID-19 the stresses of being a post separated parent may be heightened, so it's important to look after yourself as well as your family.

Be mindful of what you are eating and drinking, develop a daily exercise plan to keep yourself moving and connect with friends and family using smart phone apps and computers. Don't be afraid to ask for help from a GP if you feel you need it.

Seeking Help

If you are feeling low in your mood, and you can't shake it off after several days in a row, please seek help.

Relationships Australia WA is continuing to deliver support services for people across Western Australia during this unprecedented and difficult time and are providing support services over the telephone, video conferencing or online to clients.

If you or your family could use a little help, we offer many services and courses that are available to everyone. Our services are available to people of all cultural backgrounds, family structure, gender and sexual orientation.

Please call us on 1300 364 277 to let us know how we can support you and your family.

You can find out more about the range of support services we offer by visiting our website www.relationshipswa.org.au.

If you need immediate support, please contact:

Lifeline on 13 11 14

Suicide Line on 1300 651 251

Mensline on 1300 78 99 78

Kids Helpline on 1800 55 1800

