

# SUPPORTING YOUR TEENS THROUGH YOUR DIVORCE

Family separation is one of the biggest and potentially most disruptive transitions that a child can face – and it has particular challenges for adolescents.

*Exploring Teens* interviewed Professor Jennifer McIntosh to discover more.

There is a myth that it is better to separate or divorce when your children are teens than when they are young. On the up side, teens have the cognitive powers to question, reflect and rationalise, and the ability to understand that parents have a spousal relationship, which can assist with positive readjustment. They have networks and peer support relationships, and 40 per cent of them will have friends whose parents are separated or will separate. Many parents wait until their children complete Y12 before separating; however, family separation can significantly disrupt older adolescents' lives. We now know that between age 18 and 23 is a VERY vulnerable stage of a person's development.

Despite this, we cannot expect teens to live with overt conflict between their parents, a toxic relationship or emotional or physical violence. Teens in these situations can benefit from a low conflict separation that is well handled and does what it is supposed to do, which is make things better.

The way parents separate is key to an adolescent's ability to adjust. High-conflict separation has a profound impact on the emotional development of all children. Teenagers are necessarily preoccupied with their entry into the adult world, and they need parents to function as launch pad. Unfortunately, separating parents are usually emotionally preoccupied for some time – adults usually need at least a year to get to a point of equilibrium.

Many teens in high-conflict separations will be far more likely to leave school early than those whose parents who don't separate during adolescence, or whose parents manage separation well. They are also more likely to have teen pregnancies, failed relationships, or adopt risk-taking behaviour.

In any separation, the golden rule is to resolve your emotions, and not make this your child's business. Keep the conflict low, keep it manageable and get support early if you need it. It is normal for parents to feel bad and angry; it is not normal for children to feel frightened, perplexed or overwhelmed. Remember that how you feel about your ex-partner is very different to what your

child feels about their mother or father. The parent-child relationship is unique and the good in it needs to be fostered.

## How do you promote a seamless transition for the child moving between two families?

First make sure the arrangement suits the child. While it may have suited everyone at a younger age, many teens opt out of a 50/50 arrangement. According to The Australian Institute of Family Studies, 14 years seems to be the age when teens vote with their feet. Fortunately, good separation outcomes are not determined by the amount of time parents spend with their child, but what they do with it and how it is managed. The most common complaint teenagers have in living between two homes is parents who adopt the 'It's my time with you' approach - and blocks or makes difficult contact with the off-duty parent, even when the child really needs or wants to connect with that parent.

Wherever possible, show teens that you are able to be in the same place as their other parent when it matters, e.g. prize giving, graduation etc. Teens need their parents to be able to share delight and joy at significant events. Be 'bigger, stronger, wiser and kind'. If you have problems with that, get help.

Behaviour is a form of communication, and inevitable adolescent rebellion is a myth rather than a given. If your teen is displaying negative moods, anger or lethargy that lasts more than three weeks, or an extreme bouts of any troubling behaviour – look into it.

Major value based differences in parent expectations and discipline in the two homes create significant dissonance in the child. Involving the teen in decision making is important. Never assume you have the answers. If you are rigid in dealing with your teens, you cannot expect a smooth transition. Co-operative rather than competitive co-parenting is the way to go and if it gets hard, go for help.

## Be on your guard

Don't let the separation be worse than the marriage! You know you are making

progress if separating leads to a better situation for everyone. The child's very natural feelings of sadness and grief can be supported, and they need to know that they have not lost anyone.

Adolescence is not 'done' at 18. Young people are more vulnerable when they are in the process of transitioning to university or apprenticeships/work – even if they live away from home. 18–25 is the peak stage of emerging mental health problems and the last stage of mental health development, so an unsupported and conflicted family environment can take its toll. Don't make assumptions that separation will be easier for teens – they need you in a different way. Predictability and availability remain essential.

Finally, avoid creating additional pressure by being over-dependent on your child as they become a young adult.

## Links/Resources

- Professor Jennifer McIntosh  
[ChildrenBeyondDyspute.com](http://ChildrenBeyondDyspute.com) ✦
- Professor Robert Emery  
[Emeryondivorce.com](http://Emeryondivorce.com) ✦
- Dr. Joanne Pedro Carroll  
[Pedro-carroll.com](http://Pedro-carroll.com) ✦
- Family & Relationship Services  
Australia (FRSA)  
<http://frsa.org.au/> ✦
- Sadowski and McIntosh (2015) On  
laughter and loss: children's views of  
shared-time, parenting and security  
post-separation.  
<http://bit.ly/1P1bZDB> ✦

*Professor Jennifer McIntosh is a clinical child psychologist, family therapist and developmental researcher. She is the director of Family Transitions, a centre for the treatment and research of family transitions and trauma. She is Professor at Deakin University, School of Psychology, Honorary Fellow at the Murdoch Children's Research Institute, Honorary Senior Fellow at University of Melbourne, Department of Paediatrics, and Adjunct Professor at La Trobe University, School of Public Health and Human Biosciences.*