

An Information Sheet from the Guidance Counsellor

Parents who are going through separation or divorce are often concerned about the effects of the process on children.

Each family is unique and no two separations are the same. One couple may separate amicably and calmly while for another couple there may be a great deal of anger, hurt and bitterness. Whatever the story of a particular couple's separation, it is important to remember that parents are the most important people in children's lives. If parents work to deal with the separation or divorce in responsible and adult ways, then the negative effects on children can be minimised.

While parents may be devastated or relieved by the separation, children are likely to feel angry and frightened by the threat to their security. They are also likely to be confused by the complexity of adult emotions and behaviour.

Separation and divorce can be misinterpreted by children unless parents tell them honestly and fairly what is happening, how they are involved and not involved, and what will happen to them.

Children sometimes believe that they are responsible for the conflict between their parents. Some children take on the responsibility for bringing their parents back together.

The break up of a family is usually a traumatic experience for everyone involved and children can be especially vulnerable to physical and psychological stress during a separation or divorce.

Parents and other family members can be alert for some of the signs of stress which children may show during separation or divorce.

Some of these signs are:

- loss of motivation for school
- avoiding inviting friends home
- withdrawing
- sleeping too much or too little
- being unusually rebellious or argumentative.

What parents can do to help children through separation or divorce.

- Avoid communicating the message that children are to blame for adult problems.
- Never use children to punish the other person.
- Never force children to choose sides.
- Communicate that you will still be their parents even though living arrangements will change.
- Work hard to maintain as consistent a parenting style as possible.
- Maintain open and honest communication with each other about the children and avoid secrets.
- Do not interrogate children about the other parent's activities or friends.
- Avoid talking about the other parent behind his or her back.
- Seek help from a counsellor to deal with your own feelings and needs in order to avoid "dumping" on children.
- Model for children that it is okay to talk about feelings and to ask for help if necessary.
- Seek professional help for children if needed.

If you would like more information about separation and divorce or to discuss particular concerns, please contact Brian Thompson on 3839 4977.