



Separating? What story will your kids tell?

Have you ever thought about how your children will tell their story of your separation?

Will it be a horror story or a fairy tale?

For many children it will sadly be the former. It never ceases to amaze me that seemingly loving and caring parents cannot shield their children from the vitriol and bitterness which comes with many separations.

Drawing a child into your dispute can cause irreparable damage to them. Imagine the anxiety your child feels if he or she is told you can't afford to put food on the table because their other parent won't pay for anything. Or the pressure for a child having to keep both of his or her parents happy by pretending not to love their other parent for fear of causing upset.

What many parents don't realise when they criticise the child's other parent is that that criticism is a direct insult of the child themselves because they carry the DNA of each of you. Children shouldn't be made to feel guilty about loving or having a relationship with both of their parents. Children shouldn't be the protectors, but the protected.

I see many loving parents who put their life savings on the line to fight for an extra night per week or fortnight with their kids, espousing to me that those arrangements will serve their

child's best interests. Yet that same parent who has always put their child first, taken time out of work to care for her when she's sick, kept him safe from danger, soothed her nightmares, celebrated his achievements, that same parent, who would never deliberately damage their child, cannot see the psychological damage which is caused by denigrating the other parent in their child's presence or hearing.

If you cannot see your way clear to prioritise your child's psychological welfare by sparing them from being

embroiled in your conflict, your child's childhood memories will be tainted by your separation, and this will be the story they tell and the one they remember. Such a situation can cause difficulties for your children's short- and long-term mental health, can hamper their ability to form their own healthy relationships in adulthood and can impact their attachments with their own children. I know that no parent I meet, in the course of my practice, sets out to cause such damage to their children.



So, what can you do to try and make their story a happy one?

While no child wants their parents to separate, sparing them ongoing conflict, encouraging their relationship with their other parent and extended families and trying as much as possible to co-parent in a dignified, courteous and thoughtful way, will go some way to creating the fairy tale childhood which every child deserves.

Here are some tips;

- Don't share the gory details of your separation with your child.
- Don't discuss adult issues such as child support, parenting arrangements or Court proceedings with them.
- Never show your child Court documents or correspondence between lawyers.
- Encourage your child's relationship with their other parent, his or her new partner and extended families. I know this is difficult, especially if your relationship broke down due to infidelity. But that wasn't your child's fault. If your ex's new partner will be a part of your ex's life going forward, then they will also be a part of your child's life. Save for any real risk they might pose, there is nothing you can do to interfere with a new relationship or to prevent your child coming into contact with that person, so don't make your battle your child's battle.
- Think about participating in some post-separation parenting courses. Good ones are run by Relationships Australia and Triple P. These courses will give you some insight into how your child is being impacted by your separation and what you can do to make the transition of your separation easier on them.
- Don't discuss family law issues at changeover. And when you see each other, at the very least, exchange pleasantries and be courteous. Imagine the discomfort for your child if every time their parents come into contact, there's a stony silence, or worse still, a heated discussion.



- Try to be flexible with parenting arrangements. If your ex's family normally celebrates Christmas on Christmas Eve, why interfere with that? Children should not have to sacrifice family traditions which they've enjoyed to accommodate their parents following separation. Be sensible and generous.
- Don't try to parent remotely. Children often benefit from different parenting styles so just because your ex does things differently doesn't mean it's wrong or that it will pose a risk to your child.
- Don't stress the small stuff. The odd Maccas for dinner or being 5 minutes

late for changeover is not going to cause damage to your child in the long term.

- If you can, do things that are important for your child, together. For example, stand together at sport on a Saturday, get together to celebrate your child's birthday, co-ordinate Christmas and birthday gifts, allow your ex to attend school functions, especially those in which your child is participating, regardless of whether your child is living or spending time with them at the time of the event. Maintain your child's relationship with your ex's family, even if for some reason, your child doesn't want to or is protected from spending time with your ex.

If you can do these things, your child's story will be a happy one - they will be able to confidently say that even though their parents separated, they were never made to feel bad about it. Try to remember that after your separation, your child still only has two parents and one family. They just happen to be in two different places.



Fiona Reid is the Managing Director of Reid Family Lawyers, a boutique specialist family law firm with offices in Brookvale and Surry Hills. She is supported by a team of expert family lawyers. The firm has a wealth of experience in all facets of family law including complex property matters, parenting matters, child support and spousal maintenance issues, relocation, de facto and same sex issues, surrogacy and adoption.

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