

How Do You Rate Your Separation

When parents separate, they worry about the effect of their separation on the kids. Not only is there data to suggest that adults whose parents separated when they were children are at greater risk of divorce themselves, but also data that suggests the greater the parental conflict during separation, the greater the likelihood of negative outcomes for the children. The challenge for parents is determining their level of conflict and supporting their kids accordingly.

Parental conflict during separation can be categorized as low, medium and high.

With low levels of conflict, parents are generally able to manage the separation process between themselves. These are parents who likely sit across from each other at the kitchen table and reasonably and rationally divide their assets and develop a plan between themselves for the ongoing care of the children. It doesn't quite matter what agreement they reach, the defining variable of low-level conflict is settling matters without outside support.

Parents with medium levels of conflict find their behaviour degenerating when attempting to settle matters between themselves. Hence they require outside resources. The outside resources may include lawyers or a mediator and sometimes other friends, family or clergy. The defining variable of medium-level conflict is that parents are unable to settle without support, but given the support, they do settle.

Parents with high levels of conflict are unable to settle matters between themselves whether unassisted or assisted. Hence the defining variable of high-level conflict is when parents turn to the Courts to determine their settlement. Even if parents settle as a result of a settlement conference at Court, that they are before the Courts defines their conflict as high.

Some parents believe they shelter or protect their kids from the separation conflict. The truth of the matter is, the greater the conflict, the greater the stress upon the parents. The greater the stress, the more likely their stress will be picked up and experienced by the children. Hence it is a misnomer that parents can shelter their kids from such conflict. So the issue is less

if they are sheltering the kids, but rather how they are helping the children cope through a conflicted separation process.

While some parents believe it is best to say nothing to their children, in fact, it is often better to acknowledge the stressors and difficulties. This can be done without bad-mouthing either parent, but simply acknowledging they have yet to come to an agreement. Kids can be helped to understand that even though the parents are in distress, they both still love the children and are working to resolve matters as best they can. The children can be told that when the parents are unable to resolve matters between themselves, they turn to outside help. The parents can tell their children they are turning to wise persons to help them decide what may be best. Children will have had similar experiences with their peers. They have had times when they have been upset and when teachers have come to their aid to help settle matters. This is a positive example. Similarly then and by the parental role model, children can be encouraged to discuss their feelings and when necessary, turn to outside support such as may be offered by a group for children whose parents are separating. At the very least and in view of the parental role model, children may be more apt to talk with a teacher or counsellor if distressed. As the kids then better manage their feelings, they can better concentrate on school work and other childhood tasks.

Parents are advised to do all they can to keep their conflict to a minimum and find ways to resolve matters as amicably as possible between themselves. When negotiating, whether through lawyers or mediators, be careful not to hold on too tightly to a specific position. Flexibility may hold the key to a settlement and a smoother transition for their children.

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