

Considerations for Parents

- Children in this age group are becoming a little more independent
- Parenting arrangements still need to be clear and routine
- Children may show distress by changes in their behavior. For example, they might fall back in toilet training or act younger than they are
- Ability to reason is fairly limited
- Children's understanding of time is improving - therefore they can tolerate longer separations away from their primary caregiver
- Children often have no concept of the 'other' and tend to think just about themselves
- Children tend to feel responsible for events and may blame themselves for the separation
- Longer separations from primary caregivers are possible without too much stress. Phone calls and photos may provide comfort when children are separated from a parent. Avoiding speaking about the other parent altogether does not solve the problem
- Children require simple explanations. When they do not understand or are not told something, they sometimes make-up a story to fill in the gaps. They may talk about what they wish for as if it is the truth
- Children can also be confused about time and days of the week. They may experience a short period as being a much longer period
- Long distant parenting can be difficult e.g.: phone contact often does not work well

Source: Victoria Legal Aid - Roundtable Dispute Management and Jennifer McIntosh



Impact of Parental Separation and Conflict

Many people wrongly believe that young children do not notice or remember traumatic events. Traumatic events (such as exposure to conflict, violence etc) can seriously disrupt important aspects of a child's development. These may include foundational development in the areas of behavior, language, mobility, physical, social skills and managing emotions. Providing support to help the family rebuild a safe, secure and nurturing home will help the child recover.

Young children may experience separation and ongoing conflict in a number of ways:

- feeling worried about having to choose between parents or about being abandoned
- confusion about what is happening
- guilty that the separation is their fault
- relieved that the fighting has stopped

Age and Developmental Considerations: Two to Five Years

Common Reactions to Stress and Trauma

Young children often react to distressing events in physical ways. Young children including infants and toddlers think and feel according to their developmental level but they haven't matured the skills to articulate their thoughts and feelings to those around them.

It is important to remember every child reacts differently - this may not be in the way parents expect. Sometimes distress reactions can surface weeks or even months after an event.

Common reactions include:

- sleep problems such as not wanting to go to bed at night or difficulties getting to sleep, staying asleep, staying in their own beds or nightmares
- changes in toileting and eating habits
- going back to 'babyish' habits
- reduced capacity to manage emotions or 'self soothe'
- changes in behavior such as becoming more clingy, demanding or difficult or having temper tantrums
- fear of being separated from their parents or carers

Source: www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au



Strategies

- Check in with how your child is feeling - although their words may be limited, help them name their feelings. This will show them it is good to talk about feelings
- Do this during brief conversations - children this age cannot talk about feelings or the experience for long
- Reassure them on a regular basis that they are loved by both parents and that the situation is not their fault
- Keep up the activities (e.g. social, cultural or physical) that your child enjoys. This may give them a sense of doing well
- Encourage positive relationships by allowing your child to develop close relationships particularly with grandparents and extended family members
- Respect your child's fears, even if they appear irrational and give them plenty of time to adjust to their new situation
- Protect your child from re-exposure to frightening situations and possible reminders of the trauma eg scary movies or stories
- Expect and try to understand that some difficult behaviours or regression will occur