

Considerations for Parents

- From six months of age, children are able to attach to people other than their primary caregivers (the people who predominantly look after them)
- Children need regular and more frequent contact with parents and significant others – lengthy separations from primary caregiver can be difficult to tolerate
- A major requirement of this age group is the development of loving and trusting bonds with parents
- Children have a very different concept of time – a few hours may seem like a long time. They may also not understand that people exist even if they are not present
- Children are sensitive to conflict between parents. They may be too young to understand an argument but they are sensitive to loud voices and particularly pick up on tension between adults
- Children this age are particularly vulnerable to high conflict and trauma which affects their development
- Children need a stable routine, such as the same sleeping and feeding routines regardless of which parent they are with. Disruptions can be confusing and distressing for young children
- Parenting plans need to be reviewed regularly (every 3-6 months) to take into account the needs of growing infants/toddlers
- Parent the child is spending time with needs to look at short, consistent and frequent time with their child
- Long distant parenting can be difficult eg: phone contact often does not work well

Source: Jennifer McIntosh and Victorian Legal Aid



Impact of Parental Separation and Conflict

Babies and toddlers will often notice or remember traumatic events. Anything that affects older adults and children in a family can also affect a baby or toddler.

When children experience stress (e.g. being exposed to conflict, violence etc), this can seriously disrupt important aspects of child development that occurs before the age of three years. These may include bonding with parents, as well as foundational development in the areas of language, mobility, physical, social skills and managing emotions. Providing support to help the family rebuild a safe, secure and nurturing home will help the baby or toddler recover.

Babies and toddlers are quite helpless and depend on family and parents for their sense of safety and security. They need to learn and interact in an ongoing and consistent way. This is how babies and toddlers grow.

Age and Developmental Considerations: Birth to Two Years

Common Reactions to Stress and Trauma

- Unusually high levels of distress when separated from their parent or primary caregiver
- Giving the appearance of being numb and not showing their feelings or seeming a bit 'cut off' from what is happening around them
- Loss of playful and engaging smiling and 'coo-ing' behavior
- Loss of eating skills
- Avoiding eye contact
- Being more unsettled and difficult to soothe
- Slipping backwards in their physical skills such as sitting, crawling or walking and appearing more clumsy

NB – It is very important to note that after visits with their other parent, especially in the early stages, children may return home withdrawn, irritable or just a little bit different. The fact that children are upset after spending time with does not mean that they have had a bad time or have been neglected – they may just be struggling to adjust to changes in their routine.

Strategies

- Keep structure and predictability in place as much as possible – maintain routines around being held, sleeping and feeding. Parents need to share this information with each other and let each other know if it has not occurred. (eg – a baby who did not have their afternoon sleep with one parent may get overtired and be very difficult to settle for the other parent in the evening)
- Offer a calm atmosphere and soothing activities
- Explain (in an age appropriate way) to the child what will be happening that day in terms of their time with the other parent. Be positive about this.
- Keep to planned arrangements wherever possible. Children can easily feel rejected by a parent's failure to arrive, even if an explanation is given by the other parent
- Expect that your child may regress temporarily but not to panic if this occurs – it is a child's way of coping
- Learn to recognize and manage the child's signs of stress and understand their cues
- Parents share strategies which soothe the child when they are distressed (eg – parent sends the child's favorite toy or blankie with them when they go to visit the other parent and lets them know when they are likely to need it for comfort)
- It is generally better not to bring children back from visits so late that it is immediately their bed time when they get home – they will need time to re-settle and unwind
- Support time with and encourage your child to talk about their other parent (appropriate to their level of understanding) – if they feel this is discouraged, they may become withdrawn and confused about what they can cannot share with each parent

Source: Dept. of Human Services and Dept. of Health