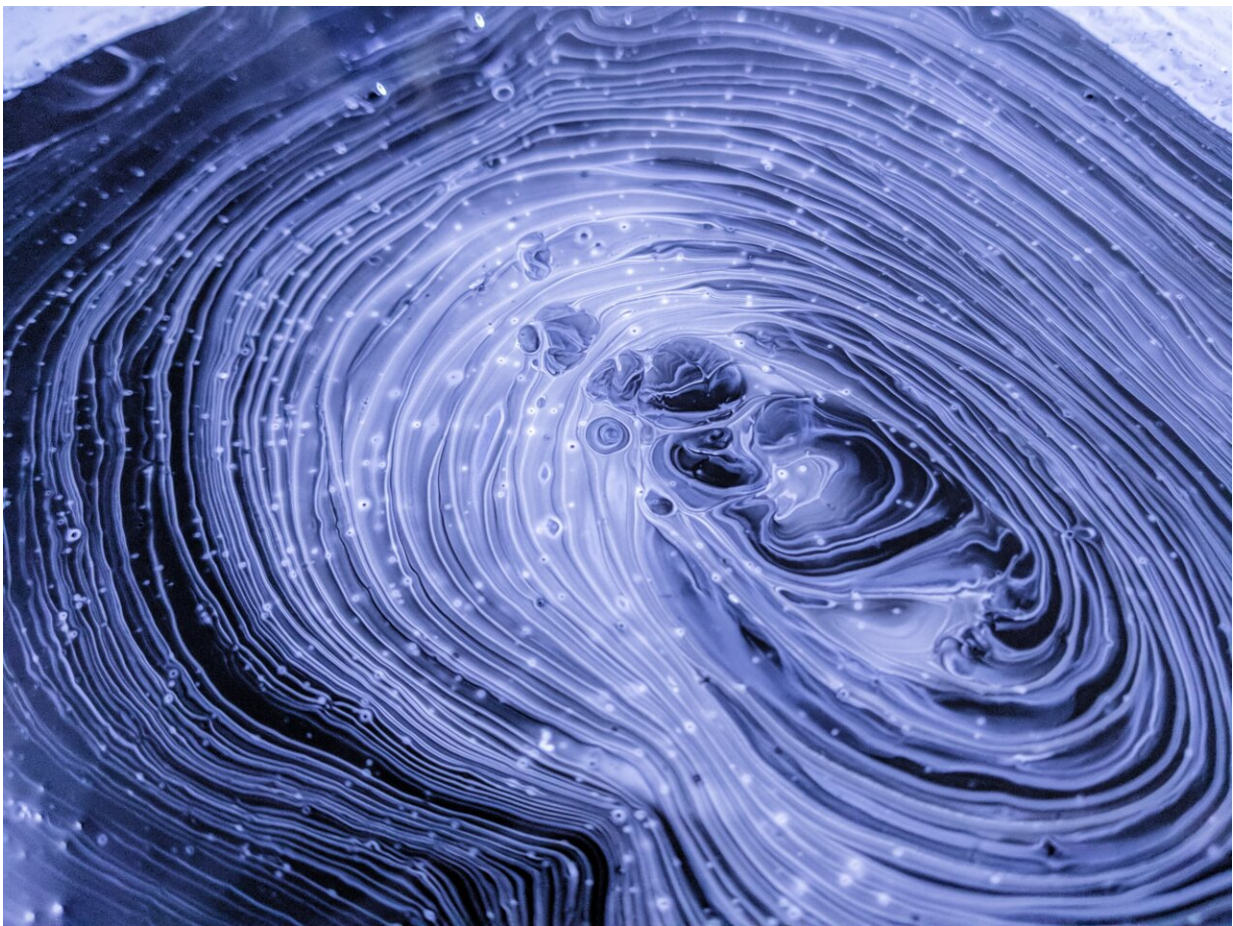


Are you and your partner thinking of separating? Here's how to protect the kids' mental health

December 14 2022, by Rachael Sharman



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There's an annual underground phenomena happening right now around Australia: couples who have decided to separate, but are putting on a happy face to perform their final Christmas as an intact family. January is [known by family court lawyers](#) as "divorce month" for this very reason.

Compared to 2020, last year saw an [increase of nearly 14%](#) in divorces granted in Australia. Nearly half of those couples had children aged under 18 years.

Some of this increase is put down to changes in court processing times. But some of it is also likely due to enforced time together in lockdown making relationship difficulties worse ([COVID divorces](#)).

These numbers are further expanded by [same-sex couples](#) who were granted the right to marry in 2017, and who are now also [starting to trickle through the divorce system](#).

Separation has important impacts on kids. There are a [higher number of mental health problems](#) observed in children from one-parent, step or blended families compared to those living in their original family.

There is also a [well-established link](#) between high levels of post-separation parental conflict and childhood maladjustment.

[Studies](#) suggest the relationship between the parents post-separation strongly influences the development of childhood problems. With hostile, disengaged or unconstructive conflict behaviors particularly associated with maladaptive childhood behaviors.

So what can parents do to best prepare their kids and avoid falling into the same old interpersonal conflicts that have led them to separate in the first place?

1. Tell them together

First of all, tell your kids what is happening as a united front. Sit them down in a quiet time with no distractions (TV, devices) where they will have plenty of time to process the information and ask questions (not as you're about to rush off to an appointment).

2. Keep the adult arguments out of it

Keep your personal/adult arguments off the table. Even if there has been infidelity, addiction, strong feelings of betrayal or blame, that is not your children's burden.

One exception may be if you have older teenage kids who may have figured out on their own what has been going on. In which case honesty is the best policy—if they are older, smarter and have it half-figured out, prepare yourself for an uncomfortable grilling.

3. Prepare for a range of reactions

Just as some children are blindsided by the news of their parents' impending separation, some parents are equally shocked at the reaction of their children.

They may seem rather ambivalent, or become immediately distressed and even angry. They may side with one parent from the outset or beg you both to work it out. It's near impossible to predict how children will respond in these scenarios.

Keep to the high ground, reassure them none of this is their fault and that they are loved and cared for. Don't be tempted to "defend" yourself or bag the other parent in what may be an emotional and tense moment.

4. Focus on the practical

Most kids—from youngsters to teens—will want to know how this is going to affect them. Where will they live, go to school, can they still play footy? Make sure you and your partner have at least some idea of a negotiated parenting plan going in.

Mediation via [Relationships Australia](#) can help with this aspect for those who are struggling to reach agreement.

5. Let others know

It's probably a good idea to alert your close and trusted family members before you tell the kids. They can help provide support for upset children, and a friendly ear to your own difficulties. Your parents/siblings and even aunts/uncles may know you and your kids individually well enough to tailor useful supports as well.

If you have a good relationship with your child's school let their teachers know what is happening—they can be on the lookout for any obvious adjustment difficulties and refer kids to school-based supports if necessary.

6. Talk about it

Remember this won't be a one-and-done discussion. Children are likely to come back to you with more questions and requests as your new lives take shape.

It's also worth remembering that as they get older, children may "re-process" the events differently, with their new, improved, older brain. Questions that didn't occur to them at four years of age may suddenly

crop up at 14 years ("Why did you leave?" "Did you try counseling?").

7. Stick to it

It's best to strive for a new relationship together as amicable co-parents. Negative talk about the other parent is effectively criticizing 50% of your child's DNA—they won't thank you for it in the long run.

Disagreements about parenting plans, and things like where to spend Christmas are likely to arise. Have a plan in place to keep difficult discussions out of earshot of youngsters and don't be afraid to use a mediator if you hit a roadblock.

Couples don't go into a romantic partnership expecting it to dissolve, but [roughly a third](#) of Australian marriages will end in divorce and nearly half of those un-couplings will involve minor [children](#).

While you may have moved on from each other, your capacity to co-parent well will have a huge influence on how your child adjusts to their new family structure. Buffering them from unnecessary harm is a worthy priority from the get-go.

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