



FAMILY RENEWAL RESOURCES PROJECT
parenting forever, through whatever

Family Renewal Resource Project (FRRP)

For separating and changed families

Older Children and a Separation- The Forgotten Children in a Family Separation

Older children are a growing and somewhat forgotten age group. Many separating parents wait until their children develop to a certain age i.e. late- adolescence or early 20's- to make the separation a reality. They expect their 'adult' child to be able to accept and manage the separation. After all, these young people are rarely at home and appear remarkably independent.

*I would advise separating parents to take a few moments and make a list of all the disruptions and concerns that this age group/your child will likely have to accept/endure from your separation. Below are a few possibilities and for sure they don't exhaust the reactions of this group. Recognize that the optics of the separation may play an important part in their reaction i.e. who appears responsible for causing the separation and who is the 'victim'. The concept of 'no-fault' divorce is **unlikely** to find quiet acceptance, here.*

A family unit that has always remained intact, even through considerable parental unhappiness, is all that these children have known. For some parents at this stage, there is a defiant 'I have been unhappy long enough by remaining in a loveless marriage; it is my time to find happiness'. That is not an unreasonable feeling, but one also needs to be sensitive to where your children are on this parental 'failure'. Otherwise, your search for personal happiness may be cut short by guilt and loss.

Personal Note: my son was 19+ when his mother and I separated. It was 'assumed' that he would manage (at least I assumed) the family breakdown. His reality of course was something different. As unhappy intimate partners, we failed *to anticipate the impact* on our 19 year old son.

A parental split rarely/never go as planned in what I would call an 'adult' or 'no-fault' way. In addition, there is the added likelihood that families with two or more mid-adolescent children may see the children live with different parents. The intact family can often become the 'splintered family' with many unintended outcomes that can become long-lasting.

Regaining an enduring life-long parenting relationship may have to be accomplished within limited opportunities with your child. Different perspectives of older children can cause serious, long-lasting rifts.

This is a reminder that every relationship is tested by the way parents separate. Unintended, negative outcomes are more likely to endure, when older children are no longer under the same roof. There is less together time to repair the damage/to work it through. In addition, each sibling relationship within the intact family has its own history based on age, personality, parental connection, etc.

Below is a partial list of reactions. *Please **compile your own list** for each child and if possible bring those lists together as parents prior to a more formal separating conversation with your child.*

1. Reaction is very individual.
2. Any # of symptoms.
3. Often believe in 'rescuing' the 'wronged' parent.
4. Often blame one parent. See the other parent as being abandoned.
5. They may also decide to live separate lives.

Make your own list for your children and your common and unique parent-child relationship!

Possible steps

- An adult explanation.
- No side taking in conversation with your child.
- Marriage happened- Shared history.
- Serious thought given to explanation i.e. honest without defamation.
- Find ways to manage family events and including extended family/grandparents.
- Issues: Inheritance, Financial; Children's education.

Thoughts

- Flexibility re: schedule with children. Persistent in making getting together happen. Manage with calm and understanding re: difficulty at making arrangements.
- Transition to a 'sort of' adult relationship. They are still a 'child', but like all growing children, the style of the relationship is changing- even more so in these circumstances.
- Each child's reaction is unique to them and often based on their recent past relationship with each parent.
- Flexibility on finances i.e. child support and other expenses. I say this because at this age the children may set their own schedule, based on their whims and the parent in favour.
 - If you can work out a formula to pay additional costs (if needed) to one parent (if they exist), you can reduce the children's sense of blaming one parent or the other re: financial shortfall or decisions that affect their lives.
 - Finding a process or the will to implement a fair system can lead to less conflict for future family get togethers.
- New dating relationships often trigger reactions from a former partner and from children. It adds a permanence- a forever changed piece that the intact family is ending and new relationships are beginning.
 - It may not matter to the 'non-moving on former partner' that you did it in a tactful, timely and sensitive way. Their reaction often has negative repercussions on the children and their initial reactions. You can only do your best at managing the situation. Your former partner could do dangerous or manipulative actions and you need to be prepared for that possibility, and take appropriate, protective steps. This can be very dangerous stuff!

- Often one partner is ready to move on, the other isn't or changes their mind from being ready. Sometimes in doing so, the moving on parent may feel the wrath of family, friends and children in the timing of dating. Older children can be volatile, and their negative judgment can be devastating to a parent, especially when added to that of other significant persons in your life.
- One has to be cautious BUT you are the only one who knows the past history of aloneness from a long-term, empty, intimate relationship. Don't beat yourself up over the reactions of others. Consider the best, next steps.
- Often, they are to carry on and time will simply move every one past the current objections. There is no excuse for dangerous behaviors by the other party. In short, simply be the best parent that you can be in these circumstances!

See recommended resources in adolescence and young adulthood!

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