

Supporting Children After Separation

For parents and caregivers who wish to understand and support children experiencing family separation or divorce

Guide



"Going between mum and dad's house"
Above artwork by Koby, 5 years old



AnglicareWA™



THE JOURNEY. COMING TOGETHER, WORKING TOGETHER

Anglicare WA delivers services across countless Countries in WA, from Balangarra Country in the North to Minang Noongar Country in the South. We acknowledge Aboriginal Peoples as the Traditional Custodians of the lands that our services operate on. In particular, we wish to acknowledge the Custodians of the lands where our offices operate. We would like to thank the Noongar, Miriuwung Gajerrong, Tjurabalan, Yawuru, Nyikina, Ngarluma, Kariyarra, Niyaparli, Martu, and Wangkatja Peoples for their wisdom and generosity, and pay our respects to Elders of these lands both past and present.

Artwork by Hayley Thompson, a proud Noongar and Yuggera yorga, who also works for Anglicare WA's YES! Housing in Perth

WELCOME TO ANGLICARE WA SUPPORTING CHILDREN AFTER SEPARATION



We've put together this booklet to help understand how children and young people may be affected by family separation and how you might be able to best respond and support your child during this time of enormous change. We often hear 'I just want my children to be ok', however, in order for your children to be ok, you too need to practice self-compassion and care. This booklet has been created to help support you as you navigate this difficult time, understand your child's feelings and give you reassurance you are not alone.

1 SEPARATION INSIGHTS

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- How children and young people tell us how they feel about separation
- Common themes we hear during counselling
- Separation common experiences for children and young people
- Talking to your child and young person about separation and divorce

2 UNDERSTANDING BEHAVIOUR

- Understanding your child or young person's behaviour during separation and divorce
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- Functions of behaviour
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- Parent and caregiver self-care
- Supporting your child through separation
- Having difficult conversations
- Adjusting to new living arrangements
- Adjusting to new routines and rules

Thanks to: Perri, Lisa and Anna for your expertise and vision with this project.

Disclaimer: This publication is copyright. All rights are reserved by Anglicare WA including total or partial reproduction. We will be talking about children of different ages however understand the complexities of different developmental stages as well as family dynamics. We acknowledge that each child's personality and situation are different and so whilst generalisations may be helpful, consideration must be given to each child as an individual and there is not a one size fits all approach.



1 Separation insights >

- Separation and divorce statistics
- How children and young people tell us how they feel about separation
- Common themes we hear in the counselling room
- Common experiences of separation for children and young people
- Talking to your child and young person about separation and divorce

Most couples separate amicably, work parenting and property out themselves and maintain good relationships



Separation & divorce statistics

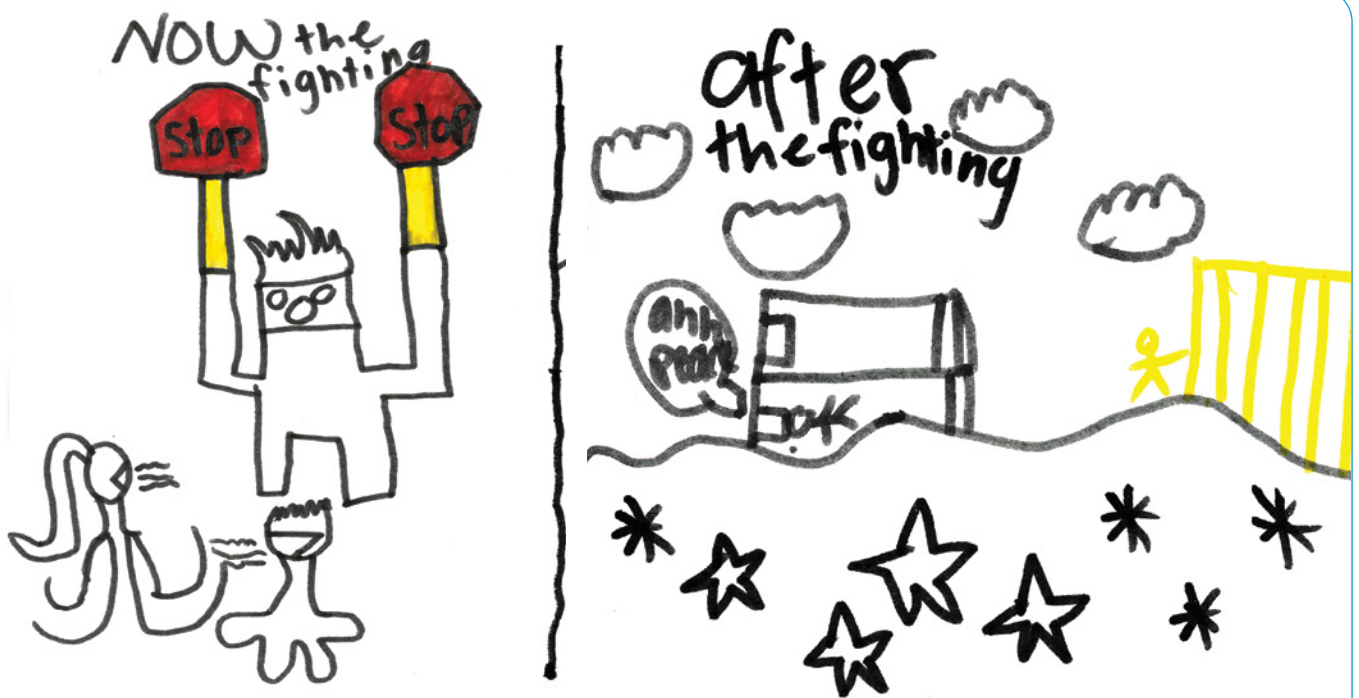
The findings from a large research program conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies tell many stories. One of the main ones is a good news story: most couples separate amicably, work parenting and property out for themselves and maintain good relationships with the other parent and their children after separation. This applies to more than 70% of separated parents.

There are also more complex stories in the data. One concerns the parents who do use the family law system. Where parents don't work things out themselves, about 3% use court, 6% use lawyer-based negotiation and about 10% use family dispute resolution (FDR), which is a form of mediation. Since 2006, FDR has become much

more widely used, with 10% of parents in 2014 using this mechanism, compared with 3% in 2006.

Separation – How children & young people tell us they feel

Often young children don't have the vocabulary to express how they may be feeling. They may also try to minimise their feelings for a number of reasons. Older children may try to keep the peace or not worry their parents and keep things inside. Sometimes the opportunity isn't given to children and young people to talk about things that are worrying them. Children and young people can communicate how they feel in a variety of ways; through their words, actions, behaviours, stories, artwork and play activities.



"I used to hear the fighting, I said STOP but they didn't listen. Now they don't live together it feels peaceful. They've stopped fighting and I can sleep in my bed better. It's like Heaven. Mum and Dad are trying now" D, 9 years old.

Common themes we hear in the counselling room

"I wish my mum and dad would listen to me"

"I'm happy they stopped fighting"

"I forget stuff when I go from one house to the other"

"I think it might be my fault"

"I was confused because no-one told me what was happening"

"They thought I couldn't hear them but I could"

"If I say nice things about Dad, mum gets mad"

"I wish it could go back to how it was"

Common experiences for children & young people

Divided Loyalties

Some children may feel they need to 'prove' to a parent that they are loyal to them. They may feel conflicted about who is to 'blame' if they are getting these messages from either parent and may 'align' with one parent, or the other when at each house. This can be exhausting for a child having to manage. They may become hyper vigilant of a parent's behaviours and moods and try to appease them or 'control' the situation.

Blaming themselves or feeling responsible

Sometimes children think they may be the reason their parents separated, particularly if they have not been given an explanation of why the separation happened. Younger children may not understand what is happening and in order to make sense of things, blame themselves. They may wonder if the parents don't want to be 'parents' anymore rather than not wanting to be together as a couple anymore. It's important that parents give children a clear, no blame explanation for the separation. A conversation that the separation is about the parents' relationship and not about them.



Talking to your children about separation or divorce

At the end of a relationship, there may be many feelings that are painful or even distressing for the adults to deal with. It's important that whilst children can see that the adults have big emotions (and can handle them, more on that later) that they are left out of intimate adult reasons for the breakup.

Children need a simple explanation around why parents separate and to know that it is about their parents relationship not about them. It may be that this discussion needs to happen a few times in order for children to process this.

Explain how the arrangements will work (if you know), e.g. 'Mum will be living in a different house so this means you will see Dad at his house and mum at her house but we will always be your parents'.

If the conversation is around divorce, there may be continuing feelings of grief and loss, due to the finality that divorce can mean. Ongoing check ins and support for your child may be needed. Being attuned to your child will help with managing this.

How to have this conversation

"We have decided we can be happier apart and this means we might live in different homes, but we are still a family – it just looks a bit different now. We still love you and will always care for you."

"We are going to have a separation because we haven't been getting along with each other. We're not sure if we will live together again but will let you know about any decisions we make."

A photograph of a young child with blonde hair, wearing a white shirt and a brown fringed jumper, being held up by two adults. The child is smiling broadly and looking up. The background is a sunlit grassy area with trees and a hammock in the distance.

2 Understanding behaviour >

- Understanding your child's behaviour during separation or divorce
- Behaviour changes you may see in your child or young person
- Functions of behaviour
- Behaviour triggers

Children's behaviour during separation or divorce

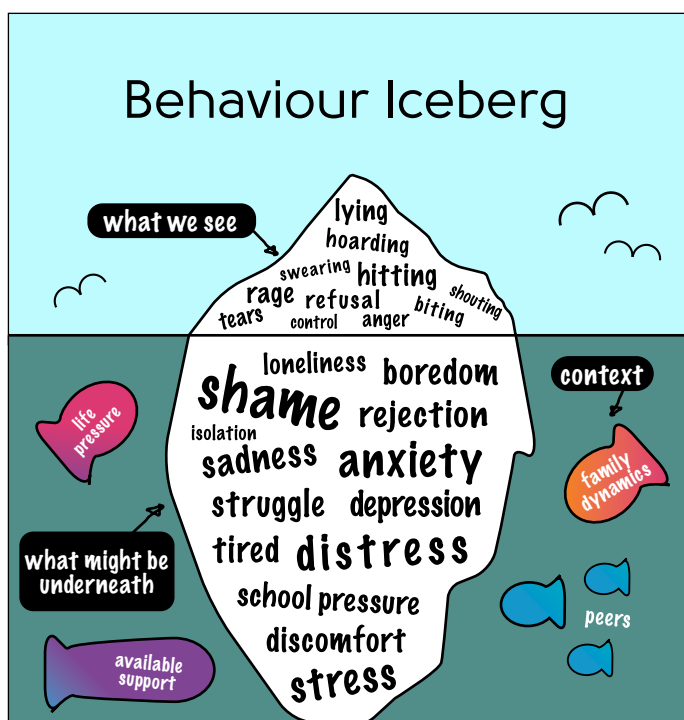
Separation or divorce usually means big changes for your family life. During big changes it's common for your child or young person to feel upset and sad. You may also start noticing changes in their behaviour. In order to support your child or young person, it's important to first understand what behaviour is and what impacts behaviour.

Behaviour: How children and young people learn and respond towards others and different situations is very complex. There are many different theories of how children learn behaviour. It is likely that different aspects come together like a jigsaw puzzle.

Developmentally, actions come before words:

Children first express themselves and their needs with behaviour. For example, babies cry to communicate they need to be fed, comforted, or have their nappies changed. Even after children begin to develop language, children and young people continue to use their behaviour to express their needs.

Behaviour "Iceberg" model: The "tip of the iceberg" refers to the behaviours we see the child or young person engage in, while "underneath the surface" are the emotional causes and behaviour context.



Behaviour changes you may see

Across all ages your child or young person may engage in challenging behaviour, particularly during times of change or family stress such as separation or divorce. Below are some common changes you may see in your child or young person according to their developmental age. We acknowledge all children are unique and this is just a snapshot.

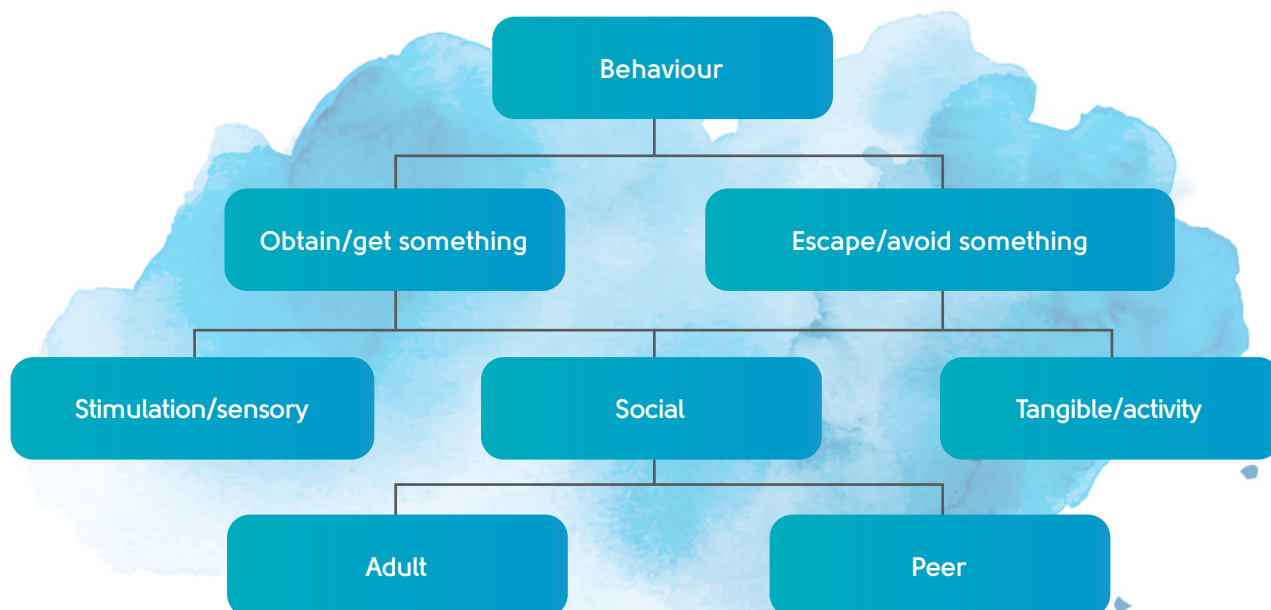
- **Birth to 18 months:** During infancy, babies can feel tension in the home (and between their parents) but can't understand the reasoning behind the conflict. If tension continues, babies may become clingy, cry more and have frequent emotional outbursts or show signs of developmental delay.
- **18 months to 6 years old:** Major disruption in home life can be difficult to accept and comprehend; child might cry often, want extra attention, regress to thumb-sucking, resist toilet training, fear being abandoned or have trouble sleeping.
- **6 to 8 years old:** May struggle with feelings of abandonment, worry about losing one of their parents and fantasise that parents will get back together. In fact, they often believe they can "rescue" their parents' marriage.
- **8 to 11 years old:** May blame one parent and align with the other parent, accuse parents of being mean or selfish, express anger by fighting with classmates or lash out at the world. The effects of divorce manifest physically — e.g. upset stomachs, headaches, anxiety, depression, withdrawn made-up symptoms to stay home from school, become anxious, withdrawn or depressed.
- **Adolescents and teens:** May be angry at parents, start shouting, name-calling or withdraw from family contact, take the side of one parent and "punish" the other, demand to spend more time with friends to stay away from the house and may grow angry if prevented from doing so. Teens may become less involved with school, responsibilities and activities. Grades may drop, truancy may increase. Binge drinking, using drugs and sexual promiscuity may occur. Conversely, teens may try to improve their behaviour, improve grades and focus on schoolwork in an effort to save their parents' marriage or make up for what they consider to be their fault.

The trick is to uncover what your child may be trying to tell you they need. Often it is a need for connection. Attention seeking is one way people phrase what we may call connection seeking.

Functions of behaviour

Behaviour serves a purpose or a function for your child. It may be a way for them to express themselves, communicate a desire, get something they want, a need met, or regulate their arousal levels to strengthen and encourage more positive behaviours. The function of the child's behaviour can often be categorised into the following four areas:

- **Sensory Stimulation:** When a person's own movements/actions feel good to that individual. For example, a child twirls their hair as they sit for an extended amount of time. If twirling hair gives that individual the sensory input they are seeking, then hair twirling will continue.
- **Escape:** When a person uses a behaviour to get away from an environment, feeling or sensation that is overwhelming or uncomfortable. For example, a child may run away from the car after being asked to get in the car in order to avoid being taken to school.
- **Access to attention:** When a person desires for access to social interaction(s). For example a child screams, "Look at me!" – If screaming gets attention, then screaming will likely continue.
- **Access to tangibles:** When a person wants access to a specific item or activity. For example, a child takes the iPad away from their sibling, so the siblings pinches them back. If pinching gets access to the iPad, then pinching will likely continue.





Behaviour triggers

Sometimes a child can escalate quickly, and it can seem unclear as to what triggered the behaviour. Challenging behaviour is often the result of a build up of slow triggers and the onset of fast triggers.

Slow Triggers go on in the background and often start a long time before we see a child respond with behaviour. Being aware of slow triggers can help you understand that your child may find things trickier today and may be likely to communicate this through challenging behaviours. **Slow trigger examples:**

- Feeling unwell, tired or not sleeping well
- Being bored, lonely or hungry
- Exposure to a loud classroom or environment over a long period of time

Fast Triggers have a fast effect and occur much closer to the behaviour. The size of the reaction to a fast trigger is usually bigger than the size of the problem, indicating there are underlying factors that may be impacting behaviour. **Fast trigger examples:**

- Being ignored or told no
- Being told to do a task they don't know how to do
- Something unexpected happening
- An event being cancelled

For example, if your child is feeling ill, hasn't slept well and is hungry they are more likely to react to a fast trigger such as being told their dinner isn't ready than if they have slept well and are feeling happy.

Separation specific triggers that impact behaviour:

- Transitioning from one house back to the other
- Missing friends while staying at different house
- Feeling sad about missing one parent and excited to see the other parent at the same time
- Feeling unsure about the new routine, rules, or expectations across each house
- Feeling worried about all the things they need to remember to pack and take

Common times you might see behaviour:

- Before, during, after parent handovers
- When going to bed or falling asleep
- Before or after school
- Birthdays, holidays or anniversary events

Remember!

It's the behaviour that is challenging, not the child. Just because behaviour has a purpose, doesn't mean it's being done on purpose. When a child displays a behaviour that is challenging, it's important to consider how frequently the behaviour occurs, what the behaviour may be in response to, the environment the behaviour occurs in and how extreme the behaviour is.

- Behaviour Escalation Cycle
- Managing the big emotions
- What children tell us they need
- Co-regulation and tips based on age
- Parent and caregiver self-regulation
- Common challenges caregivers experience

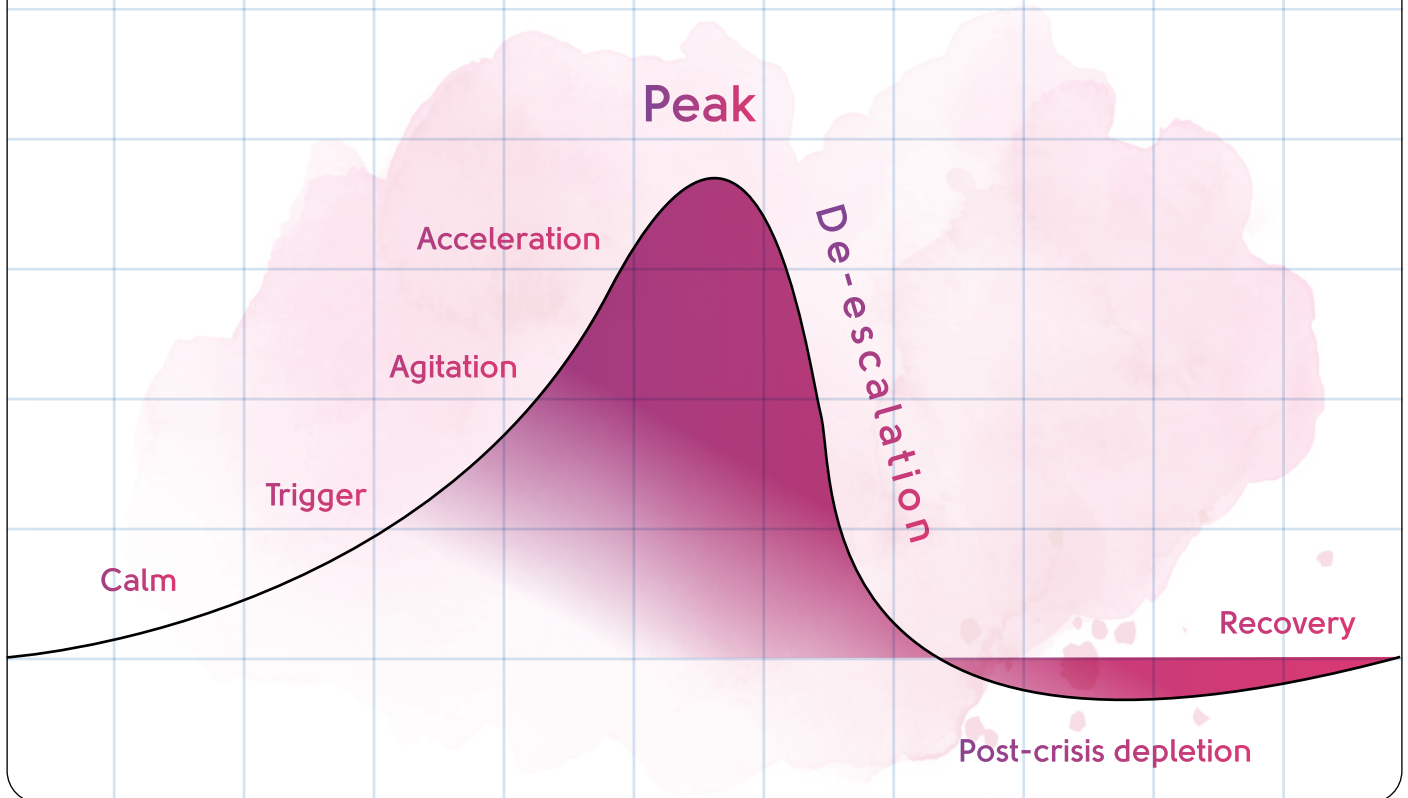
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Supporting your child >



Behaviour escalation cycle

Pattern occurring before, during and after a meltdown



Behaviour escalation cycle

A behaviour escalation cycle explores how behaviour escalates from beginning to end. Understanding the behaviour escalation cycle can help you to support your child at different stages of their escalation as well as prevent major escalations. How you can support each stage:

Baseline /Calm

- Continue doing activities your child is enjoying
- Teach new things

Triggers

- Prevent and redirect
- Modify the environment
- Change the task and provide support, or distract

Agitation

- Use non-confrontational and non-verbal behaviour
- Break down directions into small steps
- Use start instead of stop directions
- Reduce or remove demands, provide reassurance

Acceleration

- Use short phrases and direct instructions allowing for processing time
- Remember this is not a teachable moment
- Give brief verbal redirection
- Provide physical space and move others away

Peak

- Minimise verbal interaction and focus on safety of yourself and child
- Remember this is not a time for teaching as your child or young person is not able to take on or process new information

De-escalation

- Speak calmly and acknowledge feelings, emphasise a fresh start

Post crisis depletion

- Provide comfort and support
- Provide affection

Recovery

- Re-establish activities and routines

What children and young people tell us they need¹

Have their views heard by their parents when deciding parenting arrangements

Be involved in decision-making about care and living arrangements

To have their concerns about safety and abuse heard and acted on

To be given more information about the family law process

To have access to counsellors, psychologists and support groups

There are three broad categories of co-regulation support that caregivers can provide to children that will help them develop their self-regulator skills:

1. Provide a warm, responsive relationship.

- Display care and affection
- Recognise and respond to cues that signal needs and wants
- Provide caring support during times of stress
- Unconditional positive regard

2. Structure the Environment

- Create an environment that is physically and emotionally safe for children
- Consistent routines and behaviour expectations
- Well-defined consequences for poor behaviour

3. Teach self-regulation skills.

- Modelling regulating behaviours yourself e.g. taking deep breaths, going for a walk
- Providing instructions to a child when they are overwhelmed or managing big feelings
- Use strategies to self-calm and respond compassionately and effectively
- Take a moment for a deep breath or self-talk

Managing the big emotions

Parents and caregivers play an important role in shaping and supporting emotional self-regulation from birth to young adulthood, done via an interactive process called “co-regulation.”

Self-Regulation: The act of managing thoughts and feelings to enable goal-directed actions. This includes a variety of behaviours necessary for success in school, relationships and the workplace. Self-Regulation is developed through interaction with caregivers and parents. Self-regulation development is dependent on predictable, responsible and supportive environments. This process is called co-regulation and looks different across ages, as children’s capacity for self-regulation grows.

Co-Regulation: Effective co-regulation by a supportive caregiver will promote self-efficacy and allow children and young people to feel confident to practice new skills and learn from mistakes.

What children say when asked what makes them feel safe include:

“When there’s no fighting”

“When I can sit in my special spot with my blanket and look out the window”

“My Cat”

How they know they’re loved...

“Mum and Dad tell me”

“They do stuff with me like take me to the skate park”

“They listen to me”

How much co-regulation?

Your child or young person's capacity for self-regulation develops over time, and the amount of co-regulation needed from the caregiver will vary as they grow. One way to think about how much your child needs, is that for optimal functioning, in the moment, your child needs to have their self-regulation "bucket" filled.

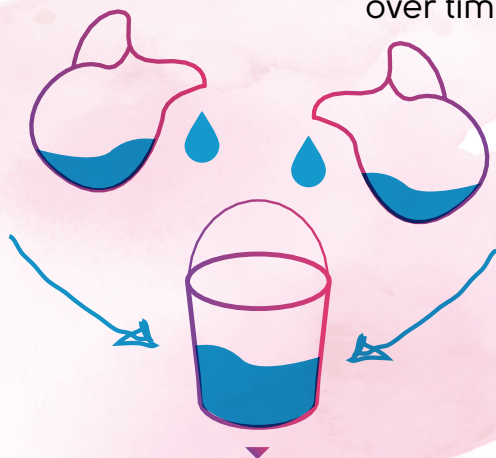
Your child's capacity to fill their self-regulation bucket is influenced by three things.

- Your child's developmental stage
- Environmental circumstances
- Individual differences

CHILD'S SELF-REGULATION

Increases over time

PARENTS EMOTIONAL COACHING
Less needed over time



CHILD'S EMOTION REGULATION "BUCKET"

What about caregiver self-regulation?

The first thing parents and caregivers can do is focus on their own capacity for self-regulation.

To co-regulate successfully, caregivers need to:

- Pay attention to their own feelings and reactions during stressful interactions with their child
- Pay attention to their own thoughts and beliefs about the behaviours of others

Co-regulation support by age

YOUNG CHILDREN

In Infancy

- Provide warmth and nurturing; physical and emotional comfort when the child is distressed
- Anticipate needs and respond to cues
- Provide structure and consistent routine
- Speak calmly and give affection
- Modify the environment to reduce stress

In toddlerhood (In addition to above)

- Teach age-appropriate rules and expectations
- Label and express emotions: teach and coach words
- Model waiting and self-calming strategies
- Redirect child attention to regulate behaviour

In pre-school-aged children (In addition to above)

- Teach and coach solutions to simple problems
- Incentivise rule-following and task completion
- Implement self-calming strategies e.g. breathing
- Provide a calm-down space and materials
- Provide clear and consistent consequences in a firm yet calm manner

PRIMARY SCHOOL AGED

- Provide a warm, nurturing supportive relationship
- Problem solving in complex social situations
- Model conflict resolution strategies such as self-talk and relaxation
- Teach planning skills needed for academic success
- Provide opportunities to make decisions and self-monitor behaviour
- Provide clear rules and consequences calmly

ADOLESCENTS AND TEENS

- Provide emotional support and empathy during intense emotion; allow space for calming down
- Model, monitor and coach more sophisticated self-regulation skills across different contexts
- Limit opportunities for risk-taking behaviour
- Provide opportunities to make decisions and self-monitor behaviour in less risky situations
- Monitor and prompt use of organisational and planning skills for successful task completion
- Provide boundaries to incentivise good choices

Common challenges parents experience after separation

- **Co-parenting:** Can be a complex and challenging process especially when parents have different parenting styles
- **Emotional impact:** Separation can cause emotional distress and anxiety for parents
- **Practical arrangements:** Parents are required to make all practical arrangements to ensure their children's needs are met e.g. housing, school, day care, extracurricular activities
- **Communication breakdown:** Communication between separated parents can be difficult and often leads to misunderstanding and conflict
- **Conflict:** Separated parents often experience a lot of stress and tension as they navigate shared responsibilities and 'time spent' arrangements
- **Single parent responsibilities:** Single parents are required to handle all the responsibilities that come with parenting e.g. providing emotional support, discipline, and moral guidance
- **Change in lifestyle:** Having to adjust to some lifestyle changes such as living in a new neighbourhood and finding a new social circle can create a lot of stress for separated parents
- **Legal issues:** Separated parents may have to deal with legal issues such as parenting orders, divorce settlements and child support
- **Financial struggles:** Separated parents are often required to manage finances on their own and may experience financial struggles as a result
- **Health and wellbeing:** Separation can have an adverse impact on parents mental and physical health which can affect their ability to be present for their children

Living in a new neighbourhood and finding a new social circle can create a lot of stress



4 Separation tips >

- Parent and caregiver self-care
- Having difficult conversations
- Adjusting to new living arrangements
- Adjusting to new routines and rules



Parent and caregiver self-care

Divorce or separation can be an extremely challenging time for parents and self-care is essential to be the best parent possible for your child.

- **Prioritise your self-care:** Take care and make time to recharge whenever possible
- **Establish good routines:** Ensure a sense of stability and predictability for everyone
- **Stay organised:** Create schedules for children's visits, communication, and co-parenting tasks to avoid increased stress and misunderstandings
- **Clear communication:** Be concise and child focused to avoid conflict with the other parent
- **Establish boundaries:** Work on the relationship with your children's other parent to ensure interactions are solely focused on meeting children's needs
- **Create personal routines:** Ensure you have balance in your life and be kind to yourself
- **Make time for hobbies and interests:** Spend time doing things that bring you joy
- **Take time to relax:** Engage in activities that support you to unwind, de-stress and stay calm
- **Take care of your physical health:** A healthy lifestyle with balanced diet, rest and exercise
- **Spend time creating positive memories:** With your children by engaging in fun activities
- **Spend time socialising:** With other adults who you may share common interests with
- **Seek support from friends and family:** Work to increase your social support network
- **Seek therapist/counsellor support:** Explore your thoughts, feelings, concerns and develop healthy coping strategies in a confidential space
- **Seek professional separation-specific guidance if needed:** Such as mediation and legal advice

*Take care of yourself,
make time to recharge
whenever possible*



Tips for difficult conversations

- *Pick your timing, make sure there are no interruptions. Ensure no-one is tired or hungry and have some snacks on hand. If you think it's appropriate maybe have some slime, playdough or other sensory toys to play with*
- *Allow for questions that may come out and be honest if you don't know the answer*
 - *Children may ask about separation practicalities, e.g. how much time with each parent. Reassure them you are still a family, "things are just different now" and that you'll keep them informed as you figure out details*
- *Watch for signs of distress and respond with love and care. Let the children know you are available to talk to them when they need to*
 - *Reflect what you are seeing and give opportunity to express feelings. You could give examples like, 'some children feel really angry when this happens in families and that's totally normal, there are so many different feelings that everyone in the family has'*
- *After the conversation, check in with your child to see how they are going. Try to keep the routines consistent and lots of comforting things available e.g. favourite foods*

New living arrangements

- Reassure your children that living arrangements aren't about who loves them most, but are based on practical issues like who lives closest to school, can get to after-school activities etc
- After the changeover, introduce rituals such as a long bath with music, eating snacks together or looking at what's on the calendar. Younger children might prefer cuddles on the couch with a story. Children may also need time alone to adjust
- Keep communicating, but try not to ask your child too many questions about what's happening at the other home. If you let your child settle in, they'll likely share things with you when they're ready
- Don't talk negatively about the other parent
- Give your child a chance to unwind. Ask whether they'd prefer a quiet activity like reading a book or something physical like outside play
- Encourage your child to keep in touch with the other parent when they're with you – for example, with phone or video calls or text messages

New routines and rules

- Create a calendar or visual resource that shows when child will be going between each house
- Let your child know who'll take them to school, where they'll sleep and how often they'll see each of you
- Keep essential clothing and personal items like nappies, underwear, toiletries, pyjamas and runners at both homes. This way your child doesn't have to remember to move everything between two homes
- If your child has a special blanket or toy, ensure they take it with them when going back and forth. This will help your child feel more secure
- To make things easier at packing time, help your child pack their bag or write a list of what they need to take. Older children might need help planning the schoolbooks and homework they need
- Consider using a shared online calendar or co-parenting app to stay organised and communicate with the other parent about what's coming up



References: Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). (various years). Divorces Australia (Catalogue No. 3307.0, 3307.0.55.001); Marriages and Divorces Australia. Canberra: ABS; Edward T Hall – Cultural Iceberg Model (1967); "Managing the Cycle of Acting-Out Behavior In the Classroom" by Geoff Colvin, 2004; Australian Institute of Family Studies (2020)

Support Services

Children Helpline 1800 55 1800

Mental Health Emergency

Response Line 1300 555 788

Crisis Care 1800 199 008

Lifeline 13 11 14

1800 RESPECT 1800 737 732

*Women's Domestic Violence Helpline
1300 650 579*

*Men's Domestic Violence Helpline
Legal Aid 1300 650 579*

*Family Advocacy and Support
Service 1300 650 579*

*Sexual Assault Resource Centre
1800 199 888*

*Alcohol And Drugs Support Line
1800 198 024*

Additional Resources

*Commissioner for Children and Young People
ccyp.wa.gov.au*

*Innovative Resources
innovativeresources.org*

*Australian Childhood Foundation
childhood.org.au*

*Keeping Children in Mind
keepingchildreninmind.org*

*Best for Children
innovativeresources.org*

*Dr Woliver Divorce App
drwoliver.com*

*Children Matter
waamh.org.au*

*Family Relationships Online
familyrelationships.gov.au*

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