



BEING CHILD-CENTRED:

**A GUIDE FOR PARENTS
WHO ARE SEPARATING
OR SEPARATED**

Priscilla Dunk-West

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About the author

Dr Priscilla Dunk-West is a social scientist at Flinders University. Priscilla researches in the areas of children and families and relationships.

Why is this guide important?

When looking at the existing research into what happens in terms of parenting once couples separate, I found that there was very little research which looked at 'what works' when couples with children separate. Working with a colleague, Kristin Natalier, I then designed a study and received financial assistance from Flinders University to undertake research into 'what works' for parents who have separated with children.

When we were interviewing parents, they told us that people around them were important. Participants in the research said that the positive stories they heard about other parents working through separation gave them ideas about how they could separate in a 'child-centred way'. This guide contains participants' stories about what helps parents navigate the world of parenting when they are separated from their child's parent. I have written this guide as a way to share people's successes and their challenges, as well as to give parents who are separating or separated insights into how others have made decisions and managed the process.

Who is this for?

This guide has been written to share the experiences of people who participated in the study with people who are in the process of separating. We spoke to people from 'straight' and same sex relationships and interviewed them about their experiences with parenting after separation. Everyone in the study described their overall post separation parenting relationship as 'positive' however this did not mean that it was always easy. This guide is designed to be useful to anyone wanting more information about how people navigate the sometimes tricky terrain of separation when there are children involved.

Communication about parenting arrangements



One of the first things that newly separated couples do is to work out what the parenting arrangements are going to be. They think about questions such as:

- How often will the child be in each parent's care, and what days of the week?
- How will financial costs of the child/ren be distributed?
- What will happen on special events such as Mother's Day or Father's Day or Christmas and birthdays?
- How flexible will the arrangements be?
- Should changes and negotiations occur in person as a conversation or should things be written up formally?

Participants in the study varied in terms of how they communicated. However one theme that came through in the research was that different types of communication could work, depending on the relationship context. Many separated couples found that written communication which was factual and non-emotive was a helpful first step to making arrangements about parenting. Others found that having 'goodwill' towards the other parent made the relationship work better. Almost all of our participants said that the way they communicated changed over time. This means that although things could have been combative at the beginning, parents worked towards a positive future of parenting together. Participants also said that 'holding back' or 'choosing the battle' was also important. We don't usually associate being silent as a form of communication yet our participants said that it was important at times not to argue with the other parent about issues that were minor or related to their past intimate relationship. Making the shift from being a partner to being a co-parent was an important aspect to give perspective.

One participant, Rebecca, explains how her relationship with her ex-partner changed over time:

"we did do a parenting plan that was just between us. We just signed the bottom of a piece of paper with a list of things that we had agreed to and that was... around six months. And then we kept that going for about a year. But after that, as our relationship kind of repaired, that's sort of gone away now. We just communicate with each other I guess about what's happening and what's relevant to decide at the time."

Similarly, Tara gave examples of the way that she manages decisions with her child's other parent:

“we have to make these enormous decisions together all of the time and it’s impossible to make big decisions together if you’re not able to communicate or if there’s just a backlog of unprocessed emotions, because you’ll just trigger each other all the time. So yeah sometimes she still gets my goat and sometimes I still get her goat but I think that’s just in a really normal way, the way a sister would or you know like, the kind of things where you just go oh come on, you know? But yeah. It’s a friendship.”

Bettina gave examples of the need to be able to negotiate:

“there’s lots of flexibility. But you know, if [my ex-partner] has got an early meeting in town and she – like I’ll just go to her house, and then I’ll take them to school, and you know, if it’s not even my day, it doesn’t matter. And she’ll do similar things for me, like, you know, if work or something, I’ve got a – you know, I’ve got something or other. So, we’ll change those things. And also, like – and sometimes with kids being sick, having to negotiate who can stay that day. It might be that I have them the night, but I’ve got something on. She might be more able to take.”

Nigel explains how he ‘picks his moments’:

“I’m well known for biting my lip... Sometimes you don’t say things because you know what reaction you’re going to get. [My ex-partner] is one that if she’s got something in her head she’ll just say it, it doesn’t matter where you are or who you’re with but I always say to her that the one thing that I really struggled with is you’re just saying it to hear – no it’s very important for me to say this – yeah but you’ve got to pick your moments. So I kind of

tend to be quite pliable in that respect and I don't sweat the small stuff and I think a lot of people sweat the small stuff and I never have done that, so if it's something that is – again I'll go back. If it's something that affects the kids I'll face it. But if it's something that affects me – I'm okay in life you know so I don't let it eat me as if I've – I know some people again and they – they get into the most minute, stupid rubbish and talk about it and you go really, is that what you've got to worry about? So I don't – so I don't sweat the small stuff but if it relation to the kids – there's been a couple of difficult occasions where the kids will keep ringing me saying come pick me up, come pick me up daddy things not good and I think when we were going through that in the early days I'd go and do it whereas now I'm completely supportive of the fact that it's tough when you're on your own.”

Home and houses



The meaning of home is important to children and when children are living across two households, participants told us about what factors were important to consider. Asking questions such as the following may be helpful to parents who are separating:

- Will bedtimes be the same across the households?
- What name will you give the households?
- Will the food be the same or different in each home and how will you negotiate this?
- What factors influence the distance between the households and how will you arrange travel between homes?
- How will you share celebrations such as birthdays across households?

Annie has a friendship with her ex-partner and spends time each week at her children's father's house for a 'family dinner'. Here she explains the ways in which they socialise:

“we actually have a family dinner every week and then we might – yeah, we'll go – we'll get a babysitter and go to gigs together or we'll go to rallies and events, community events together, take all – take the kids and we do tend to socialise probably at least once a week, just hang out and have a few drinks or whatever as well, so... Yeah, all – both of that, so our dinners are usually at home but we've gotten into a bit of a habit this year, I guess, partly because I've been single I think, but I'll go over there and we'll hang out and have a couple of drinks on a Friday, yeah.”

For Sue, there are differences across the households in relation to meal choices and she told us how she negotiates issues such as 'screen time':

“Her bedtime here is eight. I assume it's similar over there. Here, I mean, I know he would feed her only healthy food. She's vegetarian here, but eats meat there. I don't really mind... You know, we would have similar approaches to snack foods and sugars and whatever. I know he, for a long time was very anxious about screen time, and we have a kind of compatible but opposite philosophy on that where mine is I don't mind if she has screens, but she has to go outside every day.

Bettina explains how work and geographical location impacts on the ways in which she parents with her ex-partner. Bettina noted that things have 'evolved' over time in relation to the home settings:

“It evolved partly because of distance. So, we were living far away from each other, initially. And also, it evolved when I returned to full-time work. So, it was probably, from my point of view, kind of a bit more unfair in that I had a lot more of care, because I birthed [her child], and I was still – when we separated, I was still working part-time, so I was more at home, and so, I had the children a lot more. So, that evolved over time. And I mean [my ex-partner] has always had a big commitment to them, but I think she – yeah, I think she didn’t think – you know, she thought I had more time, and more energy because I was at home with them more at the time.”

The decisions relating to the arrangements between houses depend on a lot of factors. Here Karen describes the tension between the parents’ needs and the needs of the child:

“Because the other thing I read about lots, is people who do that, what’s it called, like bird-nesting thing or wherever, where people leave the kids in the house, and they go in and out, and again he suggested that at one point, because of course he’d been googling things as well, and I thought there’s no way I’m sharing two houses with this person, right, like I would just end up doing all the cleaning and shopping and laundry at two houses instead of at one, like that’s not going to happen, and if you had the money, I guess people with money if they want to do that for a time, they leave the kids in the family home and each rent out a place, or they get a cleaner or something, I don’t know, if money is no object go for it, but money was an object for us, and I really wanted my own space.”

Like Karen, Zara describes the households as being important places for toys and the responsibilities of each parent to ensure their child’s needs are met:

“Well for the most part she kind of has two of everything in lots of respects, but obviously things move back and forward in between the houses – clothes and toys and things like that and that’s never been a problem. Him and I have always taken responsibility for that stuff. Like we pack the bag and make sure it goes back to the other person and all that sort of stuff.”

Friends and loved ones



When couples separate, they often need the support of significant others in their lives. Often, the initial consequences of separation can feel overwhelming. People can feel guilty about the impacts on their child or children, they can feel like they have ‘failed’ or they can feel a sense of freedom. Participants in our study told us that friends were important to them during separation and also afterwards. Friends were described as people to whom the participant could vent, talk about their feelings and feel supported by. Friends can include people who are related, such as siblings or parents, or people who have children of a similar age. Friends and loved ones potentially offer ideas about how to work towards a positive post separation parenting relationship with an ex-partner. Questions which may be helpful to separating parents include:

- Who could you go to for emotional support, such as at a social event or coffee?
- Are there people who you know and trust to help with particular tasks such as picking up your child/ren or helping you if you were unwell?
- Do you have other parents to whom you can talk about parenting?

During our research, participants explained how and why it was important to maintain friendships and parent networks. Emily described the ways in which relatives and her best friend provided a “supporting network”:

“I think the hardest bit for me is if I tell, if I share the issue with other people my best friend or my parents or my brother who I, I seek a lot of support from, I’m, I’m very lucky I’ve got a good supporting network that sometimes their response I have to manage their response as well... definitely my parents have gone above and beyond I think and they, they’re very, they’re very friendly to him when they see him and so they’ve been very helpful.”

For Zara, sharing experiences of separation and child care arrangements with other parents has meant that over time she has made new friendships which have been beneficial to her:

“Well I think time is a big factor. I’ve got a few different girlfriends who are single mums as well and I think time is a big one”

Child-centredness



One of the central themes that emerged during our research was the relationship between being ‘child-centred’ and positive outcomes for children. Participants were able to describe how their child might view situations—this involves employing imagination. The ability to try to see the world from the child’s perspective is important for parents who are separating. Secondly, understanding a child’s needs—their social, emotional, basic care and developmental needs are important. Considering the following questions can be useful for separating parents to see the world from their child’s perspective:

- What is the age of your child or children? What needs do they have and how will these change as they get older?
- How would you describe your child? How can you continue to nurture their confidence and curiosity about the world?
- How will you frame your relationship with your ex-partner? Some parents say that they still love their child’s other parent but that they have decided not to live together. What explanation might you use and how will you continue to discuss any questions your child or children have about your separation?

Gabriella describes why 'fighting' is not helpful to her children and that it is important to recognise the extended family members who are in her children's lives:

"It's just doing the best in the situation that I'm in basically. And knowing that fighting – fighting is not going to make it any better or easier. So just being affirmative about certain things that are important and letting the other things pass is what I found is the easiest way to make it work.

... the kids have three sets of grandparents in their lives now and they love them and everyone does love the kids in their own ways pretty much so that's a good thing for them too, right?"

Emily describes the 'atmosphere' that her and her ex-partner create for their children. Emily also explains how she sees her children's feelings as a 'gauge' for whether they have done a 'good job':

"...my definition of, is it a good post-separation breakup is not about whether we exchange text messages about a particular issue, it's more about what, what atmosphere do the kids live in? And what, what are their takeaway points in terms of mum and dad? And my kids talk a lot about their dad with me and we, they've got photos of him and they call him whenever they want to and we have really good open conversations around love and how they're feeling and I think we have managed to do this in such a way that even though we don't love each other anymore, the kids don't feel like that's, they don't feel the negativity around that. And so my, my, always I think in this instance my gauge of whether I'm doing a good job of post-separation relationship will be how my kids feel about both of their parents because I think for us it's, well for me in particular that's my main focus."

Annie describes the separation between her and her ex partner's needs and the needs of their children:

“Well, I mean, I think the main thing is that we've both really approached it in a – it's not about us, it's about our child and that's the priority, so and I see in other similar situations that where people do argue a lot or whatever that they can – you know those things, like putting down the other person, making it personal and those sorts of things so I think we try pretty hard not to do that, but it's probably – it's quite easy for us as well because we do have really similar values around social justice, around parenting, around the environment and lifestyles and what's important, what isn't, those sorts of things, so in some ways that's made it quite easy, so we don't really tend to have arguments. I guess, yeah.”

Audrey said that the 'kids coming first' was important as a central value shared between her and her ex- partner in their parenting relationship:

“I think about what's important – the kids... coming first always; new partners; what are the kind of ground rules around how we would let them make decisions versus and not – and that's ... at the start – things change over time but yeah I think we did a good job of having really good discussions about money and the kids and even family; friends and things and just sort of ground rules around what we're both comfortable with each other telling people and not telling people – that kind of stuff so I think in a way we've done a good job with communicating about that, and I think since not being together we're actually being quite – I think our communication

has probably improved a little bit. I mean I still feel like I kind of make more of the effort in the sense that I'm the one who will sort of say hey how are you? Are you all right? How are you feeling this week? I mean he doesn't do that to me. But he certainly engages in the conversation and certainly is very responsive. Like if we call each other and then we call each other back. There is no game playing."

Elliott described being child-centred as focusing on the 'children's welfare':

"But, so I think that the children's welfare was regarded by both parents as being a significant thing to be valued..."

Peter described the importance of having a 'shared understanding' about the 'best interests' of the children:

"I think we're both pretty relaxed people in a way, I don't know, I think that's about that shared understanding that the kids are the most important things, and that fighting or squabbling, or not making it work is not going to help them. So even though we don't really want to talk to each other probably, necessarily, or it's uncomfortable, I guess we both realise that we have to in the best interest of our kids. So I think that's one of the key things is putting the interest in the kids before anything else."

Advice for others



We invited participants to think about how they might use their positive and challenging experiences with parenting after separation to help others navigate their way through. Participants offered this advice:

But just trying to be as rational as you can about your decisions and not be caught up in your own emotions, like to be aware of yourself and why you are thinking the way that you are and just wondering is that reasonable? Am I being reasonable or am I coming from a place of anger or frustration or am I still mad at you? So just kind of be as reasoned as you can about the decisions that you make and just aim for being cool and calm I think is probably the most overarching advice I would give someone. Because it really pays off to have that kind of approach, but you both need to approach it that way... (Rebecca)

What I'm finding is that there's kind of two ways of doing it. One is that really kind of flexible, intimate engagement with each other's lives and some people drop round to each other's places for a beer, even after they've had really nasty break ups, they've managed to do that. But for some people, it's having really strict boundaries, because then you don't have to talk about contentious issues... (Gabriella)

I think, I, I come back to making sure, if I was to give advice to people or to someone if, if I had a friend walk into my office right now or a colleague and I have had that, and ask me about how to negotiate this, it's always about for me personally, being really strong within yourself and really living true to your values and putting your, putting down, and I put it down on paper, what do I want out of this? What is the most important thing? What, what do I, what am I going to honour during this period of time? And I've reflected back on that list at times when things get challenging. And so I think it's that clear sense of your own identity as you navigate forward have, would be my point. And it's an awful time, it really is very tricky but it doesn't, you don't have to lose everything... I think there's a lot to be said for people looking within and I think very often in separations and breakups everyone's busy attributing blame, and often there is a partner that has behaved in a way you could almost attribute that blame if there's been an affair or whatever it is, but that's not going to help navigate a successful post-breakup relationship so. (Emily)

oh god it's easier exponentially by the month, it gets easier, it gets easier and easier. (Stella)