# Emerging Minds.

# Working with separating parents to support children's wellbeing: What can we learn from evidence-based programs?

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be aware that this resource may contain images or names of people who have passed away.

## Resource summary

- Parental separation can have enduring negative impacts on children if their social and emotional wellbeing is not supported.

- Children and young people can be protected from these negative impacts through supporting parents to: manage their own emotions, parent and co-parent effectively, and prioritise their children's best interests and wellbeing throughout separation.

- The research literature on evidence-based programs for separating families can provide practitioners with information about 'what works' to support parents through separation.

- The 'common elements' approach can make evidence-based programs more relevant to practitioners by identifying the specific techniques, strategies and routines that are shared by numerous programs in a particular area of practice.

- This resource outlines 13 common elements of evidence-based programs for separating parents (e.g. parents' emotional management throughout separation, normalising difficulties), offering ideas about how these elements can guide individual practice with separating parents.

- Parenting during separation can be a sensitive topic for many people and it is important to remain respectful when offering advice on the matter. Practitioners need to be careful not to overstep into sensitive areas they may not have the skills to handle, and should use referral systems as necessary.

## What is this resource about?

One of the most effective ways to safeguard children's wellbeing post-separation is to support their parents in the process. This is because negative outcomes for children in separated families are in large part associated with harm factors such as negative inter-parental relationships, family violence and other safety concerns (Kaspiew et al., 2015; Qu, Weston, Moloney, Kaspiew, & Dunstan, 2014). Australian research has identified child wellbeing as noticeably less favourable where there has been family violence, especially where children have been exposed to the violence (Kaspiew et al., 2015). This research also illustrates that children who have been exposed to family violence since their parents' separation are reported by their parents to be faring less well overall than those who have either been exposed to family violence before/during separation only, or not at all (Kaspiew et al., 2015). The Australian Longitudinal Study of Separated Families shows that where children's families are affected by violence/abuse, and/or where other safety concerns exist, and/or when inter-parental relationships are negative, poorer

developmental outcomes have been identified, particularly when these conditions are sustained over time (Qu et al., 2014).

While it is not the focus of this paper, it is also important to acknowledge the need for children to have a voice in the process of family separation. A recent Australian study on children and young people in separated families indicated the need to support safe and effective opportunities for parents to listen to their children's views and experiences of the separation (Carson, Dunstan, Dunstan, & Roopani, 2018).

This resource provides information on working with separating parents to support their children's wellbeing. Specifically, it explores the 'common elements' of evidence-based programs for separating parents – the practices, strategies and routines that they share – so that practitioners can draw from these programs in their individual work with separating parents.

After the introduction, this resource contains 13 sections. Each of these sections begins by outlining a particular common element of evidence-based programs for separating parents, and concludes by offering ideas about how this element can guide practice with separating parents.

## Who is this resource for?

While family relationship services provide specialist support for separating families, many Australian families going through separation do not engage with these services (Kaspiew et al., 2015). The Experiences of Separated Parents Study (ESPS) found that almost 70% of separating parents in Australia established parenting arrangements without any professional assistance, agreeing on co-parenting through discussion with the other parent (Kaspiew et al., 2015). While some parents manage separation and co-parenting without any professional assistance, others receive support from practitioners who work outside of the family relationships sector, such as teachers, general practitioners, domestic violence support workers and allied workers (e.g. social workers and psychologists) (Kaspiew et al., 2015; Mahony, Walsh, Lunn, & Petriwskyj, 2015). It is common for these practitioners to have limited formal training in working with separating families (Levkovich & Eyal, 2020; Mahony et al., 2015).

This resource is for practitioners from diverse health and welfare sectors who sometimes or often work with separating parents, yet have limited training or organisational support to do such work. These practitioners are likely already skilled in having difficult conversations on sensitive subjects, such as social welfare issues, but may not have specific expertise in supporting parents during separation.

As many of the practice ideas in this resource point towards in-depth conversations with parents, they are most relevant to practitioners who have close working relationships with parents. Such practitioners will likely already be talking to parents about separation, yet may need additional guidance on asking difficult questions in open ways or responding to parents' concerns about separation. Parenting can be a challenging subject to broach. Unless a practitioner is trained in teaching parenting techniques, it is best to be cautious about giving advice.

The practice ideas in this resource aim to offer general tips for communicating with and supporting separating parents. This resource is not intended to replace training or detailed information on working with separating families, which is especially necessary for families with multiple and complex needs or when separations involve family violence or child abuse and neglect. In addition, the application of any practice ideas should always be relevant, useful and safe, with careful consideration given to the specific client and practice context. As is always the case when practice ideas are offered, it is important that practitioners act within their scope of practice (including their level of experience, training and capacity). When a more involved or specialised approach is needed, then referrals to appropriately qualified professionals or services should be offered.

Family and domestic violence continues to affect children after separation and concern about children's experiences of violence has been identified by many separating parents as a key focus (McIntosh, Wells, & Lee, 2016; Wells Lee, Li, Tan, & McIntosh, 2018). While this paper will not consider in-depth approaches to dealing with family violence, the importance of practitioners' ability to assess the safety needs of children is well established. Resources to support practitioners in asking parents child-focused questions where violence is identified are included in the resources section of this paper.

Where safety issues or dangers arise that are beyond a practitioners' professional training (e.g. concerns about suspected or confirmed family violence or child abuse and neglect), practitioners should refer parents to appropriately qualified professionals or services (e.g. specialised family violence services; the appropriate child protective service in their state/territory). Practitioners need to tread a careful line when talking with parents about the specific circumstances of their separation where there may be safety concerns. It is important to respect the parents' knowledge and understanding of their children's welfare, but it is also important to stay alert to more significant concerns for the safety of the child. It is critical that practitioners are aware of their mandatory and organisational reporting responsibilities when a child is at significant risk of harm. Consulting up-to-date information is the best

course of action if you are unsure: see Mandatory reporting of child abuse and neglect; Reporting child abuse and neglect: Information for service providers, or seek advice from a domestic violence hotline such as 1800Respect (National Sexual Assault, Family & Domestic Violence Counselling Line).

**Background on the common elements approach**

The research literature on evidence-based programs for separating families can provide practitioners with information about 'what works' to support parents through separation. In Australia, ensuring that both national- and state-level programs in family and community services are evidence-based or evidence-informed is an increasing necessity for securing government funding (Graeme & Hartman, 2019).

However, implementing evidence-based programs can be challenging for many reasons, including the:

– time required for training

– high costs of program materials

– resource requirements of delivering programs; and

– lack of fit between program characteristics and local circumstances (Chorpita, Daleiden, & Weisz, 2005).

In the child and family space in Australia, the importance of developing programs in collaboration with the community to suit local needs has been found to be one of the major barriers to using standard, evidence-based programs (Haynes et al., 2020). When delivering large programs to specific communities, providers sometimes find it necessary to change aspects of the program in order to meet community needs, which has implications for program fidelity. Training, cost and workforce capacity to deliver large programs are also common barriers to their use (Haynes et al., 2020).

The common elements approach applied in this resource gets around some of these challenges by identifying the practices, strategies and routines that are shared by numerous programs in a particular area of practice, and which may be used by practitioners in various circumstances. The approach does not present 'what works' in terms of a particular program, but rather in terms of the components that have been found to work across several evaluated programs, allowing for local customisation to remain evidence-informed. It can be likened to 'opening the black box' of evidence-based programs, allowing you to 'see inside' multiple programs to gain a sense of their most important features.

In 2020, the first two authors of this resource conducted a comprehensive review to identify the common elements of evidence-based parenting programs for separating parents (Price-Robertson & Paterson, 2020). This review identified 15 common elements:

– four related to program content (i.e. emotional management in separation, parenting in separation, co-parenting in separation, and the impact of separation on children); and

– 11 involving program techniques (i.e. personalising content, psychoeducation, group participation, skills practice, problem solving, assigning and reviewing homework, normalising difficulties, encouraging, video content, attending to group process, and providing materials).

This resource uses the findings of this comprehensive review (Price-Robertson & Paterson, 2020) and makes them relevant to the contexts of health and welfare practitioners. For the purposes of this resource, the 15 common elements identified in the comprehensive review were shortened to 13 (e.g. by combining the elements 'group participation' and 'attending to group process' under the heading 'group work' and omitting the element 'providing materials'). (See Appendix 1 for a full list of the evidence-based programs included in the review and Appendix 2 for a list of the common elements that were included in each program).

**Definitions**

For the purpose of this resource:

– **Children** refers to children and young people aged from birth to 12 years.

– **Separation** refers to parental separation or divorce. It applies to parents who are/were married or in de facto relationships.

– **Separating** refers both to parents who are currently undergoing separation as well as those who have already separated but are still managing the consequences of separation.

– **Wellbeing** refers to social and emotional wellbeing, which includes mental health as well as social, behavioural and emotional development.

– **Practitioners** are professionals working in health and welfare services, including frontline service providers and managers.

– **Evidence-based programs** are programs that have been rigorously evaluated, typically using randomised controlled trials (RCT) or quasi-experimental designs, and that have a positive effect on one or more relevant outcomes.

– **Common elements** refers to specific practices, strategies and routines that are shared by numerous interventions in a particular area of practice.

# Exploring the common elements of programs for separating parents

The following sections of this resource outline the 13 common elements of evidence-based programs for separating families. Each section describes a common element, identifies how practitioners apply it when facilitating programs for separating parents, and offers a series of 'practice ideas' for individual practitioners to consider. As noted in the introduction, the 'practice ideas' sections offer general tips for communicating with and supporting separating parents. This information is based on a combination of research evidence and practice expertise. It is important to note that not all of the suggestions and ideas will be appropriate to every practitioner or practice context; they are designed to provide suggestions, provoke thought and start conversations where practitioners consider them appropriate to their particular level of expertise and practice contexts.

# The impact of separation on children

Almost all programs for separating parents include information about the potential impacts of separation on children. Research shows that children who go through a family separation are at an increased risk of a range of poor social and emotional outcomes (Stallman & Sanders, 2007). Compared to their peers from intact families, they are more likely to struggle with emotional, behavioural and academic problems, as well as problems with peers (Boring, 2011; Di Manno, Macdonald, Youssef, Little, Olsson, 2018; Dillman Taylor, Purswell, Lindo, Jayne, & Fernando, 2011). Importantly, not all children who experience family separation will experience poor outcomes. However, children exposed to family violence before, during or since separation experience greater difficulties with behaviour, relationships and learning than those who are not exposed to family violence (Kaspiew et al., 2015). Thus, protecting children from conflict – and reassuring them that they are not at fault for conflict or the separation – can help protect their wellbeing, and can support positive parent–child relationships (Boring, 2011).

Most programs for separating parents spend considerable time educating parents about the potential impact of separation on children's development and wellbeing, as well as strategies for minimising these impacts. Key messages are often related to remaining focused on the best interests of the child and keeping children out of parental conflict.

In some programs, practitioners tailor this information to specific populations or age groups of children, building parental understanding of the potential impacts of separation on children using age-based developmental psychology. Many programs also provide parents with education on the positive impact of their involvement on child wellbeing, emphasising the value of engagement and support for the child (Braver, Griffin, & Cookston, 2005).

## Practice ideas

– It is important that as a practitioner, you help parents to reflect on and understand what it is that they want and don't want their children to experience throughout the separation process. It is likely that parents will have concerns for their child's social and emotional wellbeing and you can help them to articulate these by gently asking questions such as, 'How are your children doing in all of this?', 'What is it that's most important to you in relation to how your children experience the separation?' and, 'What do you not want them to see and feel?'

– By encouraging reflection on a child's wellbeing, it becomes much more possible to support parents to develop strategies that focus on their children's social and emotional wellbeing. Some questions to ask include, 'What could you do to help your child feel more secure?' (See the Emerging Minds *Engaging with parents* course listed in the Further resources section for details).

– Provide opportunities for the parent to consider how their own stress might be affecting their parenting, in a non-judgemental and understanding way. Encourage them to check in with their children about how they are feeling. This should be done in a developmentally appropriate way (see Suggested resources for parents for ideas).

– Some parents may need support in talking with their children about their separation in a developmentally appropriate way. If you have an understanding of child development, you could offer parents advice on language and ideas to use. You could also consider directing parents to evidence-informed resources (e.g. Raising Children Network, which also offers resources for specific age ranges) or reputable services/organisations (e.g. Family Relationships Online, which offers resources, services and links to local supports).

- If it seems like it will be well received, tell parents that research suggests that it is not separation itself that negatively impacts children, but rather other factors such as parental conflict. This may help some parents to feel empowered and like they can actually do something to support their children through the separation process.

- Some families might also benefit from being offered referrals to other services that can provide more specialised and/or more intensive support in relation to children's social, emotional or behavioural difficulties.

# Parenting in separation

In some form, all programs for separating parents focus on the topic of parenting throughout separation, stressing the protective value of consistent and responsive parenting. Parenting behaviours have a direct influence on children's wellbeing and development (Kaspiew et al., 2015; Kaspiew et al., 2017; Qu et al., 2014; Rioseco, Warren, & Daraganova, 2020). However, separation may present challenges to parents that can affect their ability to parent in the way that they would like (Stallman & Sanders, 2007). Children's wellbeing can be protected by helping parents to understand how their parenting might be affected during separation, and supporting them to plan to be present and understanding of their children's needs.

Most parenting programs promote consistent positive parenting behaviours along with parents' beliefs in their capacity to parent effectively as central strategies for supporting child wellbeing and development. Many programs will draw on this understanding, supporting parents to reinforce their parenting commitments as the mechanism for change (Wolchik, Sandler, Weiss, & Winslow, 2007). Evaluations of programs for separated parents have shown that improved parenting quality influences child outcomes, such as reduced mental health disorders and improved self-esteem (Sandler et al., 2020).

## Practice ideas

- Providing advice to parents can make them feel judged or stigmatised, and may make them reluctant to share information with you about their parenting concerns. Instead, consider opening up a conversation with questions like, 'What kind of relationship would you like to have with your child during the separation process?' or, 'What is it about your child that you most worry about during the separation process?'

- It can be helpful to acknowledge and validate that parenting through separation can be challenging. Try saying something like, 'Parenting can be like sailing through rough waters, particularly when the whole family is going through the upheaval of a separation.'

- Strengths-based conversations can encourage parents' beliefs in their own capacities and skills. Consider asking questions like, 'What are some things you're already doing to support your children's wellbeing?'

- Checking-in with parents about specific aspects of a child's life can help facilitate child-focused conversations. This might include asking parents about how their child's relationships, routines, support networks, emotions and behaviours, and relationships have been affected by the separation.

- Ask parents to reflect on who they turn to when they're navigating the rough waters of parenting. If they do not have many or any supports, encourage and assist them to develop a parenting support network.

- Some parents might also benefit from being offered a referral to services that can provide specialised and/or intensive parenting support. Examples include referrals to family support workers or psychologists, or to services that specialise in providing parenting support, such as Child FIRST in Victoria. The [Raising Children Network](#) offers a helpful list of reputable child, family and parent service providers in each state/territory.

# Co-parenting in separation

The term 'co-parenting' describes a parenting relationship between former partners who share responsibility for raising their children. Developing a co-parenting arrangement is not always a clear and easy process. For some parents it can take time to reach an agreement for shared care responsibilities. Negotiating these arrangements can also be difficult during the stress of a relationship breakdown.

While conflict is often part of a separation process between parents, continued and unresolved conflict is consistently identified as one of the greatest predictors of poor child wellbeing in separated families (Amato, 2010; Schramm & Calix, 2011; Stallman & Sanders, 2007). Children with poorer outcomes are usually those in separated families characterised by family violence and other complex factors (Kaspiew et al., 2017). Poor communication between parents often accompanies ongoing conflict, reducing the quality of co-parenting and increasing children's risk of negative outcomes such as emotional and behavioural difficulties (Stallman & Sanders, 2007).

In short, the ability of separated parents to transition as smoothly as possible to a positive co-parenting relationship is often critical to child wellbeing (Dillman Taylor et al., 2011; Stallman & Sanders, 2007). However, it is also important to recognise that in families experiencing family violence, co-parenting may not be a desirable outcome due to the essential need to ensure children's safety, which can be jeopardised by contact with the perpetrating parent (Schramm, Kanter, Brotherson, & Kranzler, 2018).

Many parenting programs work with separating parents to manage conflict and increase cooperative co-parenting. Often, this information is integrated with content on emotional regulation, parenting skills and the impact of separation on children to maximise the effectiveness of the intervention. Programs might support parents with skills in negotiating, resolving relationship problems, and managing conflict in co-parenting relationships (Forgatch & Rains, 2010). For example, one program that specifically targets separated fathers aims to increase their understanding and management of situations that lead to intense anger, offering alternative coping strategies that support positive co-parenting (Braver et al., 2005).

## Practice ideas

– If parents describe episodes of conflict with their ex-partner, ask them questions about where the child is when the conflict happens. Help them to think about what their children are seeing, hearing, thinking and feeling during these events. This may help them to plan to avoid their children witnessing further conflict.

– Some families, particularly those experiencing high levels of parental conflict, might benefit from being offered a referral to a family relationship service. These services offer specialised counselling and support with the aim of strengthening family relationships. Family Relationships Online may be a helpful resource for practitioners, including to identify reputable local services.

– Co-parenting will not be a desirable, realistic or safe goal for some families. Before making a referral for additional support around co-parenting, consider asking parents, 'Would it put you or your children at risk of harm if you and the other parent worked to strengthen your co-parenting relationship via a family relationship service?' It will also be important to support the parent with identifying the most appropriate service for their specific needs.

– There are many co-parenting resources available for parents, including parenting plans, scheduling tools, books and online information. Spend some time identifying resources that you can recommend to parents. These should be evidence-based and/or from reputable sources such as the Raising Children Network (see the Further resources section for examples).

– It is common for parents to feel that they cannot change their co-parenting situation because the other parent is difficult in some way. Acknowledge the difficulties the parent faces but then guide and encourage them to focus on the things that are in their control, such as their own responses and behaviours.

– Remind parents that while some degree of conflict may be present in their co-parenting relationships, it is important that children are exposed to as little of this as possible. Try asking, 'What are some of the things you are currently doing to try to reduce the amount of conflict that your children are exposed to?'

– Encourage parents to speak to their children in ways that are respectful of the other parent. Remind them of how speaking negatively of the other parent may negatively affect their child's wellbeing. You could say, for example, 'How do you think your children might be feeling when you speak about their other parent in that way?'

# Emotional management in separation

Almost all programs for separating parents focus on parents' emotional management throughout separation. It is common for separating parents to experience powerful or even overwhelming emotions, such as anger, guilt, relief, joy, sadness, grief and shame (Willen, 2015). As parents move into their new family formations and roles – often as single parents – they may experience a decrease in their mental and emotional wellbeing, particularly if they have a history of poor mental health (Amato, 2000; Schramm et al., 2018).

Many parents also experience ongoing conflict during separation, which can increase their distress (Braver et al., 2005). Domestic and family violence, a heightened form of family conflict, is also prevalent in separating families, with 81% of separated parents reporting safety concerns with their former partner (e.g. emotional abuse, anger issues) and 53% reporting violent or dangerous behaviour (Kaspiew et al., 2015). In addition to changes in their family structure, many parents face additional stresses associated with separation, such as moving house, reduced financial and social resources, and spending less (or no) time with their children (Dillman Taylor, Purswell, Lindo, Jayne, Fernando, 2011; Stallman & Sanders, 2014).

Research shows that parents' ability to self-manage their emotions during separation reduces the likelihood that separation will have enduring negative impacts on their children's wellbeing (Grecucci, Opitz, & Capurso, 2017). As such, evidence-based programs for separating parents almost universally aim to support parents' emotional self-management and self-care skills. Some programs position parents' self-regulation at the core of developing positive parenting skills, drawing on cognitive behavioural techniques (e.g. challenging dysfunctional thoughts and attributions and mood monitoring) to promote self-regulation and minimise the risk of entrenched conflict or parenting challenges (Stallman & Sanders, 2007). Programs may specifically target the emotional regulation of one parent; for example, a focus on fathers' abilities to manage feelings of anger and powerlessness throughout separation (Braver et al., 2005).

## Practice ideas

– Some parents may benefit from the offer of a referral to a specialised practitioner (e.g. psychologist, counsellor) for emotional support or guidance in developing, practising and using positive emotional management strategies. If practitioners wish to provide some basic support to parents around emotional management techniques, they must ensure that they are working within their scope of practice and training. This may require upskilling, such as completing training in emotional regulation strategies such as relaxation or mindfulness-based practices.

– It can be helpful to acknowledge and validate the strong emotions that can be associated with separation. Consider saying something like, 'Separation is a big life change that can be really tough on people. You might find that you experience some strong emotions during this time. Some feelings that parents who have separated commonly report include guilt, stress and anger.'

– It can be useful to ask parents how they manage their own emotions for the sake of their children. Have there been times when they have avoided conflict or remained calm so that their children were not upset? If parents can describe these times, it may become possible to replicate the strategies they used in future situations.

– Encourage parents to spend time attending to their own needs. This may involve things like spending time in nature, doing activities they enjoy or find relaxing, or making contact with friends.

– Using a strengths-based approach,[1] encourage parents to focus and build on the ways in which they are already effectively managing their emotions. Try asking, 'What's working at the moment to help you manage any strong emotions such as stress or frustration?'

– If parents report domestic violence concerns that fall outside the scope of the practitioner role, refer the parent to a specialised family violence service or consult with experts at 1800 RESPECT.

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1  A strengths-based approach is a holistic way of working that focuses on identifying and harnessing a child's strengths, including their personal characteristics, skills, resources, values and hopes (Department of Communities and Justice, 2019). The focus is not the child's difficulties, and they are viewed as more than just their deficits.

# Problem solving

Many programs involve structured efforts at problem solving, which can include clarifying misunderstandings, workshopping any issues parents are having implementing the skills they have learned, and ensuring that the program is continuing to meet parents' needs.

Problem solving in this way can strengthen parents' abilities to generate alternative solutions, evaluate different options, and consider the consequences of their parenting and relationship decisions. These abilities are designed to be generalisable, meaning that parents should be able to apply them to current and future problems (Stallman & Sanders, 2014). Practising problem solving in a group setting can also help normalise the difficulties experienced by parents, allow for content personalisation, and reinforce parents' strengths (Forgatch & Rains, 2010). The ability to problem solve is an element of 'active coping', which is ultimately protective for children (Pelleboer-Gunnink, Van der Valk, Branje, Van Doorn, & Dekovic, 2015; Wolchik et al., 2013).

Problem solving is often integrated with other elements of parenting programs, such as skills practice and assigning and reviewing homework. It is likely that many practitioners, even those who are very time-poor, will be able to integrate some form of problem solving into their work with separating parents.

## Practice ideas

– Resist the role of the 'expert practitioner'. Rather than immediately providing solutions when a parent asks, 'What should I do in this situation?', guide parents in a collaborative problem-solving process that focuses on their own experiences, skills and knowledge. You could say something like, 'What might be some solutions to the issues you are facing?' or, 'Why don't we have a look at this together? Perhaps we could discuss some ideas of possible solutions together.'

– Linking a current session back to previous sessions can also provide an opportunity for problem solving. For example, you could use a series of questions to guide the parent through a process of identifying and trouble-shooting problems: 'How did you go after our last session? How did you go with the practice we talked about? Have you noticed any differences – or experienced any successes or challenges? Should we talk through some of the challenges you mentioned together and try to come up with some ideas of how to approach these moving forward?'

– Talk with parents about the link between emotions and higher-level thinking skills such as problem solving. When parents are experiencing difficult emotions (e.g. stress, anger), their ability to think clearly and solve problems is likely to be reduced. Encourage parents to reflect on whether they think more clearly when they are calm, and whether they have appropriate strategies for managing strong emotions. It can also be helpful to encourage parents to postpone any problem solving until they are in a calmer state.

– Talk to parents about their support networks for problem solving. Are there grandparents, family members, peers, friends or community resources that can be called on to help with problem solving, and to support the child's social and emotional wellbeing?

# Normalising difficulties

'Normalising' is a strategy that is commonly used by practitioners who run parenting programs to reassure parents that the difficulties they are experiencing are similar to those experienced by other separating parents. Normalising can help parents to recognise and build on their strengths, working against the tendency to focus on negative qualities (Forgatch & Rains, 2010). Many programs for separating parents identify the importance of normalising 'divorce as a family transition, particularly the process of participating in parenting education, breaking down social isolation, increasing social and emotional support from others in the community, and publicly validating and acknowledging the importance and difficulties of parenting' (Stallman & Sanders, 2014, p. 141). Programs will often include a normalising element in their introductory group sessions. This might include providing parents with statistics about separation and debunking myths surrounding separation, co-parenting or life as a single parent (Merino et al., 2017).

## Practice ideas

– Avoid using negative or deficit-focused terms such as 'broken family,' or 'relationship failure.' Support parents to have positive conversations about what separation might allow them to do differently with their children. What are the new opportunities that arise? What parenting practices would they like to adopt in their new living situation? What would they most like their children to describe about their time with them?

– Acknowledge and validate the feelings that parents are experiencing when going through a separation. This includes emotions such as sadness and grief, which are common. For example, you could try saying, 'It sounds like things are tough at the moment. It can be really difficult to go through a separation. You're not alone in feeling this way – the feelings you're describing are common in many people who have experienced separation and are a reasonable response to a very challenging time in your life.'

– Investigate some of the research, statistics and myths about separation – and be ready to share these with parents (refer to the Further resources section). Sharing this information with parents can be an inherently normalising process and can help parents to feel like they are not alone.

– Encourage parents to share their experiences openly and honestly with other parents. This can help parents to identify shared experiences and difficulties. It can also build empathy and networks of support.

# Encouraging

Parenting programs for separated parents experience high dropout rates, likely due to the associated stresses that parents experience when going through a separation. Because of this, many programs emphasise active encouragement of the parents' attendance and efforts. Encouragement can support parents to remain engaged in programs or with professionals, including through helping them to see that their progress is due to their own efforts. It can also increase parents' confidence in their own parenting and problem-solving skills, empowering them to make further changes in their lives (Stallman & Sanders, 2014).

Encouragement is an element used in many programs for separating parents. Facilitators of group programs might spend time in sessions helping parents to build hope and encouraging them to practise skills at home (Forgatch & Rains, 2010). While many practitioners already use encouragement as part of a strengths-based approach to working with parents and families, they may still draw inspiration from the way programs explicitly build encouragement into their interventions.

**Practice ideas**

– Use a strengths-based approach. Empower parents to describe their strengths by being curious about their time with their children and the commitments they have to their children's social and emotional wellbeing.

– Celebrate successes that parents identify, even if they seem small (e.g. a minor change in the child's behavior as a result of a new parenting skill).

– Help parents to remain positive and motivated when faced with perceived setbacks. For example, you could reassure parents that change rarely happens overnight. Provide encouragement by emphasising that small, persistent steps are often needed.

– Provide encouragement that progress is happening by helping parents identify their role in making positive change happen.

– Consider using the concept of shared goals as a mechanism for measuring progress and providing encouragement. For example, routine check-ins about goals can help you both to notice the small changes and 'wins' along the way.

– Try to support parents if you notice them referring to themselves in an overly negative way. You could try saying 'I notice you're telling me a lot of things that you feel you are doing wrong; however, I just wanted to share some of the positive things I've noticed about your parenting.'

# Skills practice

Skills practice is commonly used in programs to help parents practise and maintain the strategies and techniques they have learned. Skills practice generally focuses on parenting and relationships skills, such as strategies for improving relationship quality, discipline, conflict resolution and speaking with children about divorce or separation (Wolchik et al., 2013). Skills can be practised both in group or private sessions and at home, giving parents the opportunity to receive feedback and troubleshoot (Forgatch & Rains 2010; Wolchik et al., 2013). Skills practice also allows parents to see facilitators model desired positive parenting behaviours, such as reflecting on children's feelings, providing encouragement to children, and being present (Dillman Taylor et al., 2011). Research shows that effective skills practice at home can predict improvements in parenting (Berkel et al., 2018; Forgath & Rains, 2010; Sandler et al., 2020).

## Practice ideas

– Some parents will benefit from a referral to an appropriately qualified practitioner or service that can provide specialised parenting support, which may include skills practice (e.g. family support worker, psychologist). The Raising Children Network offers a helpful list of reputable child, family and parent service providers in each state/territory, which may be useful for practitioners.

– If practitioners wish to provide basic skills practice to parents, they must always ensure that they are working within their scope of practice and training. This may require upskilling, such as via completing training in delivering parenting support or programs.

– For practitioners for whom delivering parenting support and skills practice is within the scope of their role and training, the following ideas may be helpful:

  – Before starting a conversation about skills practice, check-in with parents about how they are going. What do they feel is working well at home with their children? What are the skills and commitments they most value as a parent? Acknowledge the strengths and difficulties they identify. If it feels appropriate, invite them to share if they have any areas they would like to work on, or if there is anything they would like to learn.

  – Ask parents what has or has not worked for them in the past. Parents may have tried a particular parenting skill at home before and found that it did not work for them.

  – Try to recognise opportunities for informal skills practice in appointments with parents. If you work with both parents and their children, this could include modelling parenting skills. For example, if a child shows a desirable behaviour in the sessions (e.g. packing up toys after use), you could model the skill of positive reinforcement for the parent by providing immediate, clear praise.

  – If parents raise a difficult scenario they are facing, offer them the opportunity to do skills practice. For example, you could say something like, 'We've just been talking about having a difficult conversation with your ex-partner. Would you like to practise that ahead of time with me?'

# Assigning and reviewing homework

In many programs for separating parents, practitioners use homework activities to promote skills practice for parents in their real-life setting, as well as to reinforce new learning (Forgatch & Rains, 2010; Wolchik et al., 2000; Wolchik et al., 2013). Parents may be given home practice assignments related to new skills, such as active listening and tracking their own or their child's behaviour. In some programs, parents are encouraged to keep a weekly diary of their skills practice. Homework assignments can also give parents opportunities to receive feedback, both from group facilitators and from other parents.

In one-on-one practitioner settings, formal homework tasks may not be feasible or even desirable (e.g. due to time limitations) but similar benefits can be achieved through more informal approaches, such as asking parents to reflect on their own and their children's emotions and behaviour.

## Practice ideas

– To promote parent and/or child wellbeing, you could suggest to parents that before your next appointment they engage in a parental self-care activity (e.g. doing an activity they find relaxing, such as yoga, going for a walk or meditation) or a fun child–parent activity (e.g. completing a craft activity).

– For practitioners for whom delivering parenting and emotional support is within the scope of their role and training, the following ideas may be helpful:

  – Suggesting that parents try out a new skill at home or keep track of any changes in their or their child's situation. Try saying something like, 'It would be good if over the coming week you noticed what has triggered you emotionally [e.g. if emotional reactivity is the issue under discussion] and we can reflect on this together in our next session.'

  – When asking parents to reflect on something (e.g. their or their child's behaviour), always make sure that what you are asking them to do is realistic and achievable. Reassure parents that your role is to support them – and that if they have any challenges with the task you can troubleshoot this together next time.

- Asking parents to reflect on an issue can be a good way to revisit topics from previous sessions. Consider saying something like, 'Last week we talked about you keeping an eye on this problem [e.g. your emotional reactivity] in between sessions. Shall we check in about how that went?'

# Personalising content

It is important that practitioners are able to tailor their sessions and topics of conversation to a parent's specific circumstances and needs. Examples include personalised goal setting with a parent, helping a parent to identify their strengths, providing tailored feedback, troubleshooting barriers to change, and empowering a parent to choose their preferred delivery method (Braver et al., 2005; Forgatch & Rains, 2010; Haine, Sandler, Wolchik, Tein, & Dawson-McClure, 2003; Stallman & Sanders, 2014; Wolchik et al., 2000).

The one-on-one support offered by many practitioners provides a valuable opportunity to deliver tailored information and strategies that consider each family's unique circumstances. Adopting a personalised approach helps ensure that information and support is as relevant as possible. Importantly, practitioners can encounter specific family circumstances that may make supporting families through separation more complex (e.g. family and domestic violence, families from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, families with children with a disability). In these situations, tailoring content based on specialised knowledge becomes especially important (Schramm et al., 2018).

### Practice ideas

- Avoid making assumptions about parents' experiences and perceptions of separation. Acknowledge parents as the experts in their own lives. Be curious about their unique experience – and really listen. Sometimes people just want to have their side of the story heard.

- Once you have a shared understanding of a parent's unique perspective, you can start to talk about what your shared goals might be. This can sometimes be called 'contracting' between the practitioner and the client. Encourage a conversation with parents around what they want to get out of your work together and develop a plan for how you might achieve this.

- Talk with parents about how they prefer to receive support. There are many ways to work with parents and some methods of delivery will work better for different people. Some people learn best through coaching or active discussion, while others prefer to be given material to take home and engage with on their own. Similarly, some prefer face-to-face sessions, while others prefer telehealth or a combination of both.

- For some parents and families, practitioners will need to engage in additional reflection and planning. For example, families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds may have a different cultural understanding of family life. In cases like this, you may consider upskilling in cultural understanding and humility, accessing secondary consultation from specialised organisations, using the services of translators or interpreters, or investigating if there are other practitioners or services that can deliver culturally sensitive support (perhaps from the same community as the family).

# Psychoeducation

Psychoeducation is an intervention that aims to increase people's understanding of a specific topic through providing information and skills education. Psychoeducation can be delivered in many forms; for example, through group sessions where parenting skills and conversations are modelled by the facilitator, or through sharing materials such as presentations, information sheets, brochures and referrals for services.

For separating parents, psychoeducation can increase parental understanding of the emotions and processes involved in separation, and the effects this might have on children. Common topics of psychoeducation include the impact of separation on children, parenting in separation, co-parenting in separation, and emotional management in separation.

Some programs also use psychoeducation to increase understanding of child development and wellbeing, including how parents can support their child's positive development. This can help parents to increase their awareness of developmentally appropriate skills and goals for children. Psychoeducation can empower parents to make decisions that lead to better stability and control in their own and their children's lives (Stallman & Sanders, 2014).

While many practitioners will not be able to run formal psychoeducation intervention programs or sessions, psychoeducation can be used in less formal ways by integrating it into individual practice.

## Practice ideas

– Always check with parents about their own understanding and knowledge before offering education. Ask parents if they are receptive to receiving information about separation, mental health, parenting, co-parenting or any other topic. There can be many reasons that parents are not yet ready to receive this information and pushing ahead in this scenario is likely to be ineffective.

– Directly ask parents what kinds of topics they would like to know more about, and what delivery mediums they prefer (e.g. information sheets, websites, books, videos).

– Before offering psychoeducation, spend some time identifying relevant resources and research from reputable sources. Psychoeducation involves sharing evidence-based and rigorous information (see Further resources for examples).

– Unless you are trained in offering psychoeducation, it is best to adopt a 'light touch' approach. This could include supporting parents' curiosity, helping them identify gaps in their knowledge, and pointing them in the direction of reputable information, resources or services (see Further resources for examples).

– For many practitioners, providing more in-depth psychoeducation will be beyond the scope of their role and training. In these circumstances, if a family requires additional information, then a referral to a specialised family relationship service could be offered. Family Relationships Online can assist practitioners with identifying reputable local services.

– Where providing psychoeducation is within the scope of a practitioner's practice and training, modelling a collaborative learning attitude may be helpful. For example, if you are offering parents some form of psychoeducation and they ask questions that you do not know the answers to, take this as an opportunity to model a collaborative learning attitude. You might say something like, 'I was thinking about that question you asked last week, so I looked it up and found some information. Are you interested in hearing about what I found?'

# Group work

Most programs for separating parents involve working in groups with other parents who are also going through separation. The format gives parents an opportunity to discuss feelings, normalise experiences, learn from others and gain support (Navaneetham & Ravindran, 2017; Rose, 2009). For a group-based intervention to work best, parents need to actively participate in sessions, contribute to a positive group dynamic, give other parents positive feedback and share their own experiences. This can help parents to feel connected with others going through similar experiences, providing social support and comfort during a time that might be isolating.

Program facilitators are usually trained in managing important aspects of the group process and dynamic. In programs for separating parents, facilitators might use the initial session to establish group expectations and rules, and to work on the cohesion of the group (Dillman-Taylor et al., 2011). Many parents who participate in programs reflect that group work was a positive experience, noting that it helped them to learn targeted skills and provided support from other parents (Dillman-Taylor et al., 2011).

Many practitioners will not have the time or the training to run multi-week parenting programs or facilitate group sessions with separating parents. However, practitioners may be able to use other tactics to expose parents to the benefits of group process and reduce potential isolation.

## Practice ideas

– Ask parents about their social situations with questions like, 'Is anyone in your life supporting you through this separation?' or 'Who do you normally turn to when facing problems like this?' Such questions will help you to gauge whether the support of a group may be important for parents. It can also help parents to identify positive existing social supports in their lives that they can utilise.

– Do some research on relevant groups that are available in your area, which you may be able to suggest to parents. These may include groups specifically for separating parents, parents who do not live with their children, parents from specific cultural or ethnic groups, or parents who need additional support.

– Some parents find that online forums and groups offer them a positive sense of community and support. Do some research on relevant online forums, focusing on those that are hosted by reputable organisations or websites, and preferably those moderated by trained professionals.

# Video content

Video content is commonly used to deliver educational material in parenting programs. Video content might include role plays, peer testimonials and skills modelling. Some programs will use video modelling to demonstrate both correct and incorrect examples of the skills being shared (Braver et al., 2005). Video can also be used as a motivational tool; for example, showing children speaking positively about visitation with a non-primary parent or expressing their emotional attachment to their parent/s (Braver et al., 2005).

In some programs for separating parents, video is also a mechanism for parents to record themselves practising skills, which is then shown to their peers and/or group facilitators. Parents can then receive feedback and support, and have their strengths reinforced. Given that parents can feel apprehensive about watching videos of themselves practising skills, the programs stress the importance of viewing videos from a perspective that is judgement-free and strengths-based.

## Practice ideas

– Talk with parents about their preferences for learning or receiving information. Some parents may prefer informational videos (e.g. videos that model positive parenting skills) to written information.

– Spend some time identifying video-based parenting resources that are evidence-based and/or from reputable sources (e.g. webinars or parents sharing their experiences from the Raising Children Network). This will ensure you are prepared when parents ask you for suggestions and recommendations.

– If you are trained and skilled in providing parenting support, you may wish to consider if it would be helpful to encourage parents to try recording their skills practice, similar to the homework tasks set in group programs. This could be for their own reflection or to ask for feedback from a trusted person such as a practitioner. This will not be appropriate for all parents. Implementing this would require careful consideration of potential sensitivities (e.g. parental emotional capacity and capability, privacy and confidentiality) and therefore should only be undertaken by suitably trained and experienced practitioners.

# Summary

For many parents, separation is a difficult and lengthy process – indeed, it can be one of the most challenging periods in people's lives. Some of the best ways to ensure that separation does not have lasting negative impacts on children is to support parents to manage their emotions, parent and co-parent effectively, and hold their children's wellbeing in mind throughout the separation.

This resource has drawn on the common elements of evidence-based programs for separating parents to outline ways in which practitioners – wherever they are positioned in the health and welfare sector – can promote children's development and wellbeing by supporting parents through separation.

# Further resources

**Suggested resources for parents**

**Parenting communication series** (Emerging Minds, 2019)

– Communicating with your baby during 'tough times'

– Communicating with your toddler during 'tough times'

– Communicating with your primary school-aged child during 'tough times'

– Communicating with your teenager during 'tough times'

This suite of resources may be useful for separated parents with children of varying ages. These guides help parents to connect with their child during 'tough times' (e.g. separation) and provides tips for developmentally appropriate conversations and interactions with children.

**Parenting children (4–8 years) with anxiety series** (Murphy & Robinson, 2020)

– Parent guide one: Anxiety in children aged 4–8

– Parent guide two: Gathering information about your 4–8 year old child's experience of anxiety

– Parent guide three: Supporting your 4–8 year old child

Children of separating parents may experience anxiety. This suite of resources may be useful for separated parents of children aged 4–8 years who are experiencing anxiety. It explains what anxiety looks like in children aged 4–8 years and provides tips and suggestions for how to best support them.

**Parenting after divorce or separation resources** (Raising Children Network)

– Single parents and positive parenting

– Separation or divorce: helping children and pre-teens adjust

– Separation or divorce: helping teenagers adjust

– Two homes after separation or divorce: helping children and teenagers adjust

This suite of resources may be useful for parents supporting their children through a family separation. It provides tips and suggestions for positive parenting and outlines how parents can protect their children's wellbeing.

**Suggested resources for practitioners**

**Emerging Minds e-learning courses**

Please note that site registration is necessary to access these resouces.

– Supporting children's mental health when working with separating parents

– Engaging with children

– Engaging with parents

– Understanding child mental health

– The impact of family and domestic violence on the child

– Family and domestic violence and child-aware practice

Experiences of Separated Parents Study (Kaspiew et al., 2015)

This report compares the experiences of parents who had separated either before or after the 2012 family violence amendment reforms were introduced, using findings from the Experiences of Separated Parents Study. Practitioners may find useful information regarding the experience of separated parents and their children in the following sections:

– Characteristics of separated families. See Table 2.1: Demographic characteristics of separated parents, by parent gender, 2012 and 2014.

– Family law services use. See Table 4.8: Main pathway used by parents who had sorted out their parenting arrangements, by parent gender, 2012 and 2014.

– Child and parent wellbeing. This section focuses on the effects of family violence, including witnessing family violence, on child wellbeing, and includes a discussion of parents' perceptions of their own wellbeing and relationship with their

child.

Post-separation parenting, property and relationship dynamics after five years (Qu et al., 2014)

This report presents findings from Wave 3 of the Longitudinal Study of Separated Families. It explores information such as the quality of inter-parental relationships, child-focused communication between parents, pathways for developing parenting arrangements, and child wellbeing. Practitioners may find this information useful to assist with normalising processes with separated parents and to help to alleviate myths and misinformation around separation and divorce.

Domestic and family violence and parenting: Mixed method insights into impact and support needs (Kaspiew et al., 2017)

This report provides evidence on the impact of family violence on parenting and how to strengthen the relationship between mother and child after family violence has occurred. Practitioners working with separated families where there has been family violence may find this resource useful.

Post-separation parenting arrangements: Patterns and developmental outcomes: Studies of two risk groups (McIntosh et al., 2011)

This report summarises two Australian studies of post-separation shared parenting arrangements, with a focus on developmental outcomes for children in two risk groups: children living with ongoing parental conflict after separation, and infants and pre-schoolers. Practitioners working with separated families where there is conflict or young children involved may find this resource useful.

Give children a bigger voice more of the time: Children's and young people's experience of the family law system (CFCA webinar, 2018)

This webinar explores recent research on young people's experiences of the family law system during parental separation. This resource may be useful for practitioners working with children of separated families, particularly when utilising a child-inclusive framework.

Parenting in contexts of family violence and inter-parental conflict: Implications for practice (CFCA webinar, 2018)

This webinar explores the implications of recent research on women's and children's experiences of family violence and inter-parental conflict. This resource may be useful for practitioners working with separated families where there is conflict or family violence.

# Authors and acknowledgements

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