



Changing houses in separated families

It is Saturday morning, and Jenny is preparing 8-year old Hayden to go to his father's house for his fortnightly access visit. Hayden and his 12-year old sister, Candice, will spend Saturday night and Sunday night with their father, Jock, and he will drop them off at school on Monday morning. On Monday afternoon, they will return to their mother's house from school.

Jenny and Jock have been separated for about a year and there has been a lot of fighting about access in that time. Jenny says that Jock (who has a new baby with his partner) is not parenting the children appropriately. She complains that when they come back from an access visit with Jock, Hayden and Candice are unsettled, oppositional and defiant. Hayden tells her that he is allowed to stay up late, eat whatever he likes, and is unsupervised on the TV or computer. He complains that she's too strict on him and sometimes says that he wants to live with his father. However, Candice complains that her father won't let her talk to her friends on the phone at night and that he restricts her social life. Jenny is frustrated, and concerned that her children's inappropriate behaviors are starting to appear at school. She complains about Jock to the children and becomes very distressed at times. When collecting them or dropping them off, she and Jock sometimes have bitter arguments about where the children's clothes should be, being late to collect or drop them off, or parenting rules. Jenny always tells them that she will collect them if they're unhappy at Jock's house, and that they don't have to go if they don't want to go.

Jock complains that Jenny is "poisoning" the children against him and that Candice is becoming a "man hater". He finds it difficult to negotiate with her about curfews and her social life, and tells her that she will turn out like her mother did – a pregnant teenager. Jock tries desperately to keep a positive bond between himself and Hayden, and is loathe to punish him for inappropriate behavior because he sees so little of him, and he wants their time together to be a happy time.

Parental separation is hard for children. The departure of a parent leaves a vacuum in the house with the loss of a playmate or role model. The quantity and quality of time spent with each parent is often undermined by the additional responsibilities each has in their sole-parenting role – or with the start of another family. The loss of family rituals and traditions can cause anxiety, and there is often a sense with younger children that they are somehow partly responsible for the separation, but can also make the parents reunite. The reasonable confusion and anger that children may feel about the separation can result in aggressive behavior, and the sadness can result in low mood and withdrawal.

The transition from one household to the other is a ripe opportunity for conflict between parents, and between parents and the children. Children may pick up on one parent's grief or anger as the children move to the other household, and may become anxious about leaving that parent. Comments about the other parent's parenting or lifestyle; asking the child to carry hostile messages; creating a need for the child to hide information or feelings about the other parent; making good-byes drawn out; encouraging the child to protest about going; and mourning while the child is away all serve to make the child feel anxious

about leaving the one parent and ambivalent about going to the other parent. This can result in tantrums and tears at transition time and makes everyone feel distressed.

Here are a few ground rules that will help reduce distress around transition times and reduce the children's anxiety.

1. Make the transition times predictable, reliable and consistent. Both parents have to make certain that times of collection or drop off are adhered to, with minimal disruption to routines and plans.
2. Do not undermine the other parent's parenting – it undermines the child's trust and security and ultimately backfires, as the research shows that when one parent complains about or undermines the other parent, the complaining parent is the one who is criticised by the child in young adulthood.
3. Keep arguments or possibly heated discussions with the other parent for private phone calls – make the handover times as neutral and upbeat as possible. Keep your attention on a short, sweet goodbye to the child with some advice to have fun. This allows the child to leave feeling that you are going to be OK without them and that they have your permission to enjoy their time with the other parent.
4. Make sure that you give your child a clear message that you see his or her time with the other parent as an important and positive experience, and that you trust the other parent to cope with any difficulties that may arise. For example, if the child becomes distressed while with the other parent, allow the other parent to be the parent and comfort the child. This builds the secure base for your child with both parents and encourages positive social and emotional development.
5. Make sure that you have a plan to keep yourself happy and productive while your child is with the other parent. Meet friends, exercise, indulge in selfish pleasures such as making your favourite food, reading as long as you like, or lying in the bath for an hour!. This can also be an important time to spend time alone with a new significant other. Remember that if your child can see that you are happy and positive, they can be relaxed and get on with their own development rather than worry about yours!

Remember that some separation anxiety means that you and your child have a strong and loving bond. Try not to turn that bond into shackles that bind you both and disrupt development. By making transition or handover times as positive and smooth as possible, you will allow your child to feel secure about leaving you and going to the other parent. By encouraging your child to have a strong positive bond with the other parent, your child will grow to be a loving and secure human being, even if his or her parents don't live together any more.