

# Working with children when their family breaks down

by Heather Barnes

At some stage it is likely that child care educators will have a child in their service who is experiencing family breakdown.

Marriage or relationship breakdown is almost always a highly disruptive and stressful experience. The decision to separate is usually painful for all family members, and often compounded for the parents by concerns about the effect it will have on their children.

Both the adults and the children may be experiencing a range of feelings that may or may not be evident to educators. Parents may feel sad, lonely, angry, shocked, insecure, or worried they have failed in some way. Their children may feel very confused about the changes that are happening, such as one of their parents leaving the household. Sometimes children are exposed to situations where they hear things said by one or both parents that are confusing and distressing.

Children go through a grieving process that is different to that of adults. They often don't really understand what is happening or why it is happening. They may feel that they are to blame for the situation and/or feel angry with their parents. They may feel abandoned or rejected by the parent who leaves, or afraid that if one parent has left the other one may also leave. They may feel confused about whether it is all right to love the parent who no longer lives with them.

During these times it is more important than ever to help children feel a strong sense of belonging within their service and at the same time to support family members. The Principles and Practice of the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) remind educators of the importance of providing consistent emotional support to children and communicating freely and respectfully with families (EYLF, 2009, p.12).

## Children's reactions to family breakdown

It is important to remember that each child will react differently to a family breakdown. They may show all or none of these reactions.

### This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles:	1.1-1.3, 3.2 and 3.4
OSHCQA Principles	1.1, 1.2, and 5.3
QIAS Principles:	1.1-1.3 and 2.1

With support and understanding from parents and educators, these reactions may not occur or will reduce over time.

**Infants – birth to 6 months:** Even very young babies absorb the tension, fear, withdrawal or hurt of the people they love and the changes happening around them. Reactions to stress and change may include feeding, sleeping and toileting disturbances. Some infants may become listless and apathetic or fail to thrive.

**Infants and toddlers – 6 months to 3 years:** Due to strong physical and emotional attachment to their parents, separation from them may make children anxious or clingy. Their concept of time means that a few hours seems like a very long time. Reactions may include attention seeking, regression, protest, detachment, or disturbances to normal feeding, toileting and sleeping. They may also be cranky and unsettled more often.

**Preschool age children – 3 to 5 years:** Preschool age children often know more about what is going on than adults realise, although much is incomplete or misconceived. Reactions may include denial, attempts to promote reconciliation, depression, sleep disturbance, fears and nightmares, regression, and increased demands for affection and attention. Younger children may revert to 'baby talk' or have speech difficulties such as being at a loss for words or stammering. They may begin to wet the bed during the night despite being toilet trained. They may refuse to go to bed or insist on sleeping in the parent's bed. At child care they may be excessively active, non-compliant, have frequent tantrums, show aggression or refuse to play with other children.

**School age children – 6 to 9 years:** Older children may still find it hard to express feelings easily and sometimes blame themselves for the separation of their parents. They may react with intense feelings



of sadness, loss, guilt and conflicting loyalties. Behavioural problems may be evident, especially at school and child care. They may find it difficult to concentrate, and have physical symptoms such as headaches and stomach aches. These children may seek reassurance from their parents and also compete with younger siblings for parental attention.

**Pre-teen age children – 10 to 12 years:** While pre-teen age children have a greater capacity to understand and express feelings, they may experience intense conflict over their loyalties to one or both parents. Children may feel responsible for looking after a distressed parent, or express blame and anger. Feelings of sadness and loss may result in an inability to cope with problems and daily activities. There can sometimes be a change in sleeping and/or eating habits as well as excessive complaints of physical ailments. In some cases there are outbursts of anger, defiance of authority, truancy, theft or vandalism.

### **The impact family breakdown may have on the child's experience in child care**

Children may struggle to cope with changes in their home as well as differences in expectations, boundaries and other aspects of child-rearing. For example, they may find it very distressing if pick-up arrangements from child care are altered.

Each child will have an individual way of coping, but loss affects a child's capacity to thrive in learning and social settings such as child care. Educators have an increased responsibility to support and nurture the child through change.

The key is to look for changes in a particular child's behaviour. If emotional or behavioural problems are extreme, persist beyond six months or compromise the child's capacity to learn, encourage families to seek professional help.

### **Strategies to support children**

The child care service needs to be a safe and supporting place for the child at all times, but especially so during a family breakdown. Being there for the child is one of the most significant things that educators can do for children who are showing signs of stress.

- Closely observe children's behaviour to learn what they are thinking, feeling or are worried about and when they may need extra support and attention
- Listen to and observe them carefully. Some children are able to verbalise their feelings while others may demonstrate their stress through their actions
- Allow children to decide when they wish to talk about what is troubling them and be guided by them in continuing the conversation
- Provide consistent boundaries for challenging behavior, but understand the reasons for that behaviour
- Keep the program and routines consistent, but be prepared to be flexible if necessary
- Provide play experiences that help children make sense of what they are facing:
  - A doll's house with small figures can give children some control over situations in which they feel powerless
  - Puppets can provide the opportunity for them to talk about what is troubling them
  - Dramatic play allows them to act out the issues that concern them
  - Sensory play with water, sand or clay helps release their emotions
  - Art experiences such as painting, drawing and finger-painting are also a way to release emotions and provide an avenue to talk about their feelings with a caring educator
  - Books can provide children with stories about similar situations to their own and can be helpful tools for discussion.

## Other issues that may arise as a result of a family breakdown

All educators working with the child need to be very clear about who has access to the child. They must have procedures in place to guide what to do if a non-custodial parent arrives to collect the child unexpectedly. It is also important to understand the service's confidentiality and privacy policies so that all families are treated respectfully.

Physical care of the child may be different in a shared custody situation so it is important not to be judgemental or biased against a family member.

As with all children, it is important that any signs of abuse or neglect be reported to the appropriate authority.

There are many government and local community service organisations that provide information for separated parents to help them deal with issues relating to their children. Services can include counseling, family therapy, anger management and other relationship courses.

## Reassuring the family

Parents may be anxious to know how their child is coping with the change in circumstances. It is helpful to reassure the parent that educators are monitoring the child's wellbeing. It is important to be honest, but at the same time sensitive to the anxiety and perhaps guilt that may be involved. Share the strategies you are using to assist their child so that they can also try them at home.

## Conclusion

Children are all different. How they cope with a family breakdown will depend on their maturity and sense of wellbeing.

## The effects that a family breakdown may have on educators

When educators have developed warm and trusting relationships with families it can be quite distressing to learn that a family is breaking down. While it may be tempting to take sides, it is important to remain impartial and supportive of both the parents involved and focus on keeping the children's lives as consistent and predictable as possible.

In some cases, parents may divulge personal information about the family breakdown and use educators as confidants. While it is important to listen to parents who are upset, use neutral comments such as, "It must be a difficult time for you," and then ask if they have support available to them. Let parents know that this is not your area of expertise and suggest avenues of assistance such as the local community health centre, neighbourhood house, local government services and a range of helpful websites such as Child and Youth Health, Parentline and the Child Support Agency.

They will eventually adjust to changes in the family if both parents are prepared to communicate and work cooperatively in their parenting arrangements. Children need the ongoing love and support of both parents as well as the emotional support of their educators to assist them in troubling times ■

This article relates to EYLF Learning:

- Outcome 3: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing

## References and further reading

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