

FACTSHEET No 1:



a better way to settle

Ages and Stages of Child Development

Most separating or divorcing parents want, above all to ensure that any adverse effects on their children are kept to a minimum.

In order to achieve this, parents need to have an understanding of how children develop emotionally throughout the stages of their life and in particular what signs to look out for that might indicate they are being negatively impacted by the changes taking place within the family unit.

No matter what stage of their development, the most important thing for a child to know is that they are not to blame for their parents' divorce or separation. Whilst this can be expressed verbally it is important that parents also communicate this to their children by their actions.

A further key need for children of all ages, but particularly for younger ones, is predictability, routine and structure.

The following is a brief overview of the different stages of emotional development that children go through and some signs of distress to look out for:

Birth to 1 year old:

- Learn to bond with one or both of their parents
- Need to learn to form healthy attachments
- Should experience stable and secure relationships

Signs of distress include excessive crying, feeding or sleeping issues, a withdrawn or irritable child.

1 to 3 years old

- Use of language begins
- Start to explore their outside world and want to have control of it
- Often they can't remember people who they don't see regularly
- Need an available loving parent as they thrive on security, love, and flexibility

A distressed child may be withdrawn or clingy or may change eating or toilet habits. Crying lasting more than twenty minutes is an indicator of distress and where distress is extreme can result in developmental delay.

3 to 5 years old

- Engagement with the outer world, start to form their first friendships with other children
- Understand the need for limits and boundaries and need consistent discipline
- Need to be free from direct parental conflict and may benefit from individual time spent with each parent

Signs of distress can include regression with toileting, sleeping and eating. Children of this age can become irritable or clingy and shows signs of anger or behavioural problems. They can be easily confused and cause concern and chaos by telling different stories to each parent.

5 to 8 years old:

- Begin to differentiate between fantasy and reality
- Start to notice gender difference; relationships with people start to deepen
- They develop a strong sense of fairness
- Important they maintain structured and consistent time with each parent and receive support for their schooling, activities and interests and friendships

Distress can manifest itself though regular complaints of headaches, tummy aches or other minor ailments and they may struggle to sleep or regress to wetting the bed or baby talk. They can start to apportion blame for the separation and will show signs of pain or sadness about parental quarrels.

9 to 12 years old:

- Need to develop self-esteem and feel good about their physical development
- They form their own values and test those of people around them
- Important they know their parents will give them support and that it is OK to love them both even if they are not together
- The ability to communicate with their parents about their feelings is vital at this stage

A distressed child may withdraw from friends and social activities. Some compensate by becoming 'too good' whilst others rebel. Loyalty conflicts often result in a child aligning with one or other parent often strongly, with an open rejection of the other parent.

Adolescence:

- Develop greater independence from their families
- Sense of morality may strengthen and need to express resistance and disapproval of others
- They want flexibility and understanding and often want a say in how parental contact is structured
- They need positive role models and to be given consistent boundaries

Distress can be expressed by excessive anger, negativity and isolation or conversely by being seen as "perfect". School or friendships can become difficult and experimentation with alcohol, drugs and sexual promiscuity is common. Their capacity for a 3rd person perspective enables withdrawal from parental fights.