

COPARENTING DURING SEPARATION

BEING A TEAM FOR THE CHILDREN



COPARENTS: Adults, recognized as a child's parents, who act and communicate to ensure the child's well-being, regardless of their parenting situation.

Marital separation is a major transition in the lives of parents and children. It is a time of upheaval for everyone, affecting their points of reference, roles and emotions. But it can also be a time when they can strive for new kinds of balance.

Being a coparenting team during a marital separation is quite a challenge. Here are a few guidelines for fostering a positive coparenting relationship when going through a separation, for the benefit of both children and parents.

REALITIES

What coparents and children experience

WHAT COPARENTS EXPERIENCE BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER SEPARATION

Going from life as a couple to life as separated parents requires extensive reorganization. Marital separation is not the end of parenting: **parents remain a team for their children**. This requires setting aside injuries, misunderstandings and grief.

40%

of children born in 1998 in Quebec experienced their parents' separation before the age of 17, according to the Longitudinal Study of Separated Parents and Stepfamilies in Quebec.

(Desrosiers and Tétreault, 2018, cited in Saint-Jacques et al., 2023)

"The family doesn't disappear, it changes."

BEFORE SEPARATION

- An accumulation of tension (repeated conflict, poor communication)
- Parents at odds: sometimes one parent – the one who initiates the break-up – is prepared, while the other has the impression of being subjected to the news
- Announcing the break-up to the children sometimes happens in the heat of the moment, without any joint preparation
- Stress related to material issues: debts, housing, division of assets, future parenting plan



TIPS / ADVICE

- Recognize each person's emotions
- Take the time to prepare a joint, reassuring announcement for the children.
- Promptly seek support (mediation, people close to you).

DURING SEPARATION

- A whirlwind of emotions: grief, sadness, anger, guilt, confusion
- The need to reorganize daily life and share parents' time with the children, while dealing with mourning the loss of being a couple
- Risk of neglecting the children or involving them in conflicts
- The importance of seeking help to remain available for the children



TIPS / ADVICE

- Take emotional breaks before discussing sensitive topics
- Put decisions (schedules, expenses) in writing to limit tension
- Remember that children must not become messengers or arbitrators

AFTER SEPARATION

- Finding what is gained: more personal time, greater sharing of parenting tasks, a sense of calm
- Reinforced parenting skills and resilience: "We've learned to do things differently, and it works!"
- Adapting to often more difficult economic realities
- Need to maintain long-term cooperation (school meetings, major events, adolescence)



TIPS / ADVICE

- Take advantage of time without the children to recharge your batteries
- Continue to adjust family organization over time (schools, teenagers, restructuring of the family)
- Celebrate coparenting successes to fuel motivation

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WHAT CHILDREN EXPERIENCE

Children's needs

During a separation, children perceive tensions, experience changes in their environment and may feel and express strong emotions. At this time, **the children's well-being and needs must remain the focus of parenting decisions**, even when the relationship between the parents is strained or conflictual.

Emotional needs

Children need...

- to have access to both parents and to maintain a positive relationship with each one
- to have the freedom to love both parents without feeling caught in the middle
- to be able to express their emotions freely, without judgment or pressure
- to be heard by an available, caring adult
- to feel that they are not to blame for the separation
- to have a relationship of trust with each parent

Concrete, everyday needs

Children need...

- reassurance in the face of change: emotional stability, continuity of care and predictability in their daily lives
- reassuring routines in both living environments to feel secure
- a certain consistency between parents in the messages conveyed on values and ground rules

! CHILDREN SHOULD NEVER BE EXPECTED TO

- **play messenger between parents**
- **carry the weight of marital conflict**
- **choose sides**
- **be responsible for a parent's well-being**

Frequent impacts of separation on children

Possible impacts on children	Observable signs	What parents can do
Initial shock and sense of loss	Sadness, tears, repeated questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➔ Explain the decision together in simple terms.➔ Reassure them: "We will always be your parents."
Changes in points of reference (two homes, new school, schedules)	Anxiety, sleep disorders, regression (cleanliness, eating, sleeping)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➔ Maintain routines and transitional objects (cuddly toy, poster).➔ Post a visual calendar of the days at each parent's home.
Stress and anxiety vary from child to child	Some children seem fine, while others become irritable, aggressive or withdrawn	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➔ Observe without minimizing or dramatizing reactions.➔ Give them room for expression (drawing, notebook, support group).
Conflicts of loyalty / sense of being torn apart	Concerns about pleasing each parent, guilt, the other parent's marked loneliness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➔ Authorize and facilitate contact (video calls)➔ Avoid criticizing the other parent in front of the child
Exposure to parental disputes	Fear, agitation during handovers, stomachaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➔ Choose neutral, calm places for child handovers➔ Establish clear rules: no verbal attacks in front of the children
Strong, lasting emotional reactions	Mood swings or moodiness, progressive isolation, sadness or anger, sometimes expressed in a roundabout way	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➔ Watch for prolonged distress signals➔ Consult a professional if anxiety persists or worsens



WINNING PRACTICES

Healthy coparenting after separation

You can use a number of strategies to improve your coparenting practices during a separation.

STANCE AND ATTITUDE

- Refocus on the child rather than on past conflicts
- Show flexibility and mutual respect
- Accept that the other parent may do things differently

CONSISTENT PARENTING

Even when separated, parents should aim for a minimum of consistency and agree on important values and shared ground rules

- Make sure the children know that there are certain essential rules on which their parents agree
- Respect the decisions and consequences conveyed to a child by the coparent
- Set aside time for coparents to discuss disagreements and find joint solutions

COMMUNICATION

To promote healthy and constructive communication between co-parents:

- Stick to the facts and stay focused on the children (avoid personal criticism)
- Use a suitable channel of communication: oral, written messages, applications or notebooks
- Clarify your expectations and check what the other person has understood
- Avoid arguing about the past, and focus on concrete solutions
- Agree on clear rules together (frequency, tone, time for discussions)

SUPPORT CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING

- Be present and available: listen without judgment, reassure and name the emotions observed
- Provide stable routines: the same bedtime, mealtime and homework rituals
- Make the time spent together enjoyable: games, activities, giggles that create safety bubbles
- Use the child as a barometer for signs of irritability, withdrawal or aggressiveness that indicate increased stress, and make adjustments or get help
- Inform and reassure: clearly explain what will change and remind them that separation doesn't mean their parents don't love them anymore

PUT THE CHILDREN AT THE HEART OF COPARENTING

- Recognize that children have the right to love both parents and to be free to express that love
- Look at the coparent through their children's eyes (What do they like about them? How do they see and love their parent?)
- Recognize your strengths and those of the coparent (Are they complementary?)
- Given a situation, ask yourself what your child would think or say

PROTECT THE CHILDREN FROM CONFLICT

- Don't quarrel in front of the children
- Don't criticize the other parent, even in their absence, in front of the children
- Avoid sending messages through the children
- Check a child's comments with the other parent if necessary
- Don't use a child to punish the other parent (e.g., restrict contact)
- Don't ask children to choose sides
- Create a neutral space for child handovers (e.g., school, childcare centre, community organization)
- Don't give the children too many details about the reasons for the separation (origins of the conflict, who initiated the break-up, etc.)

The majority of separated parents in Quebec (60%) say they have weekly or daily contact with the other parent, while around 21% have little or no contact.

(Institut de la statistique du Québec (2017))

Resources for separated parents

- **Family mediation:** to clarify understandings, facilitate dialogue and reach mutual agreements
- **Written communication tools:** Notebooks, online coparenting apps (e.g., FamilyWall, 2houses)
- **Children's books:** to explain the separation using appropriate words (e.g., Éditions CHU Sainte-Justine)
- **Support groups for children and parents:** (e.g., in community organizations and CLSCs):
 - For children: age-appropriate places for expression (neutral ground, talking, drawing, playing)
 - For parents: information and support on separation; workshops to improve coparenting
- **Community services:** local resources for parents (fathers, mothers, blended families)
- **Professionals:** social workers, psychologists, coparenting coaches
- **Online resources:** Videos, podcasts, moderated forums



WINNING PRACTICES (continued)

SHARING TASKS

- Take stock of everyone's expectations: discuss how each parent sees the sharing of responsibilities
- Analyze what worked before the separation: identify which habits can usefully be kept up and which need to be adjusted
- Start afresh if necessary: take new contexts into account (e.g., shared custody, place of residence, working hours) to adapt the sharing
- Take into account individual strengths and preferences: allocate certain tasks according to what each person does best or prefers to do, to find a balance that works for your team
- Create and discuss a detailed list of parenting tasks: identify everything that needs to be done around children; assess what each parent is willing to do, what they are already doing, and where they can contribute more
- Identify sources of tension and find concrete solutions: when an irritant keeps coming up, work together to find a lasting solution (e.g., provide a complete wardrobe at each parent's house, use an app to track cost-sharing)
- Document the agreement: put it in writing (e.g., in a Word document, Excel spreadsheet, online app) to keep track of it and avoid misunderstandings
- Call on your network as needed: involve friends and family to learn new tasks, have a good time or lighten some of your responsibilities (e.g., invite a friend or family member who likes to cook)
- Regularly review the agreement and adjust it as necessary: a good sharing arrangement is precise, clear, flexible, and it evolves; make sure that you each feel comfortable with your role and that the arrangement remains fair

In Quebec, the most common type of arrangement is the "50/50 shared residence" (44%), where the child spends an equal number of nights with each parent.

(Saint-Jacques et al., 2023)

A significantly higher number of separated mothers than separated fathers say they assume parental responsibilities more often than the other parent.

A higher number of separated fathers than separated mothers considers that parental responsibilities are shared equally or almost equally.

(Institut de la statistique du Québec (2017).

BENEFITS

Why invest in a good coparenting relationship during separation?

FOR CHILDREN

Positive coparenting enables children of separated parents:

- To maintain healthy, stable ties with each parent
- To feel emotionally secure
- To develop coping strategies for other life events
- To learn to express their needs and emotions

FOR PARENTS

Despite the challenges, many separated parents report positive effects:

- To be better organized
- Personal time when without their children
- A richer, more intentional relationship with their children
- A stronger sense of parenting ability

"We didn't succeed as a couple, but we have a successful separation."



Sources:

• Institut de la statistique du Québec (2017). *La relation coparentale et le soutien social des parents: résultats de l'Enquête québécoise sur l'expérience des parents d'enfants de 0 à 5 ans, 2015*. <https://statistique.quebec.ca/fr/produit/publication/relations-coparentales-et-soutien-social-des-parents>

• Saint Jacques, M. C., Robitaille, C., Godbout, É., Baude, A., & Lévesque, S. (Eds.). (2023). *La séparation parentale et la reconstitution familiale dans la société québécoise : Les premiers moments* [PDF]. Presses de l'Université Laval. <https://www.pulaval.com/libreacces/9782766300105.pdf><https://www.pulaval.com/libreacces/9782766300105.pdf>

Participants in the *Coparentalité et Séparation* videos, (2025) (5 filmed interviews):

- Diane Dubeau, PhD, Professor/Researcher, Department of Psychoeducation and Psychology, Université du Québec en Outaouais
- Lorraine Filion, Social Worker and Family Mediator, Co-Chair of AIFI (www.aifi.info).
- The parents: Alex Dubert, Marie-Claude Dufour, Daniel Lapalme.

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