



All They Really Need: Trusting the Wisdom of Nature to Raise Resilient Kids

NAVIGATING SEPARATION

Although separation and divorce have a reputation for being harmful to kids, it's worth considering the *way* separations happen. A persistent feeling of insecurity creates harmful stress, whether in the context of an "intact" nuclear family, or in the context of separation or divorce. The best buffer against this for children is to nurture their sense of security, trust, and control. Below are some tips, in no particular order:

Be honest with your child, but only share what is necessary.

Your child needs to feel secure with her caregivers. She doesn't need to know about your infidelity or your partner's terrible ability to manage money, but she does need to know that the separation is not her fault and that she will be cared for and loved.

Create a climate of trust and security.

Make sure that you follow through on your commitments, and make honest amends when you can't. You cannot control your child's other parent, but you can buffer any pain your child may feel. If your child is expressing disappointment in his other parent, empathize with his feelings without adding your opinion: e.g., "You felt hurt when Mom didn't call when she said she would," as opposed to, "Mom really is dropping the ball these days, isn't she?"

Create a climate of predictability.

Particularly when children have more than one home, or if different caregivers are coming and going, it is important that they know what to expect. Create a routine schedule that works best for your family. Depending on the age of the child(ren), marking off days on the fridge or having a shared online calendar can help with that sense of control.

Minimize harmful conflict, both obvious and subtle.

It is just as traumatic for children to witness abusive behaviour towards a parent as it is for them to experience it themselves; it is critical that the child be protected from this situation, ideally remaining with loving caregivers. At the more subtle end of the spectrum, conflict can take the form of asking a child to pass along messages or bad-mouthing the other parent in front of the child. Be mindful of these behaviours and do everything you can to avoid them.



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Practice compassion.

Having compassion for your child's other parent(s) can be difficult. However, as the Dalai Lama tells us, it is always possible to be kind. When you deliberately practice loving kindness, compassion shines through. This doesn't mean being a doormat; we also want to model setting firm boundaries through effective conflict resolution strategies. Read on!

Learn and practice healthy conflict resolution strategies.

Conflict need not be a bad thing if it is constructive. Even after a separation, most parents must still make collaborative parenting decisions, which requires effective skills of conflict resolution. There are many resources and tools that can help improve this practice: see worksheets on BASIC mindfulness, compassionate communication, and loving kindness as starting points. Bonus: these skills are useful for all relationships, not just tricky ones, and are great ways to communicate with your kids too!

Take care of yourself like a grown-up.

You are likely having a challenging experience yourself. Make sure you're doing the necessary work to process your big feelings: journal, learn skills of emotional regulation, seek the support of a therapist, have a chat with a friend. Do not expect your child—no matter how old they are—to be your confidant or counsellor; they need *you* to be the parent.

Consider how you frame the separation.

In dominant culture, the “institution” of marriage is perceived as being lifelong, despite having evolved when lives were shorter and marriage fulfilled different societal purposes than it does now. Framing separation as a failure carries stigma and shame that can be transferred to a child. Explore if the separation can be reframed as a choice, an opportunity for growth, and/or redefining the nature of relationships. At the risk of an eyeroll, “conscious uncoupling.”

Seek a qualified mediator or family therapist.

Even if you are doing decently on your own, a therapist is important to have in your family's circle of care to help prevent troubles from arising, and to help navigate them if they do.