

The Effects of Parental Separation on Children

FACT SHEET

United Nations
Convention on the Rights
of the Child (UN CRC)
[Link](#)

The UN CRC in Child
Friendly Language
[Link](#)



The UN CRC in Child
Friendly Language
[Link](#)

BC Representative for
Children and Youth
[Link](#)

Infants and young children, ages 0-7 years, are particularly vulnerable when faced with prolonged separation from one or both parents. This may be due to the absence of a primary caregiver at a time when biological and psychological needs require continuous caregiving. Parent-child separation may result from various situations such as the death of a parent, separation or divorce, military deployment, or parental incarceration. Most instances of separation involve a significant degree of restructuring in the home which may include, but is not limited to, adjustment in income, responsibilities, living arrangements, physical or mental duress, care giving relationships, or associated stigmas. Protecting the parent-child bond in the presence of disruptive life events is an important consideration to aid a child's resiliency.

The term *attachment* refers to a child's relationship with their caregiver which is first formed in infancy and further developed into early childhood and adolescence. Bonds of attachment are developed over time and provide a needed sense of security in children. Responsive and sensitive care giving promotes bonding as safe spaces are provided for children to explore their environment and when children's biological and psychological needs are attended to. Caregivers who are open and available to their child's needs provide the opportunity for children to shift between exploratory and fear systems of the brain. Safe exploratory experiences ultimately help a child to regulate their emotional responses to perceived obstacles in their settings. Remaining in close contact with a primary caregiver enables children to have a point of reference in times of social and emotional distress.

There are varying degrees of parent-child attachment styles. Secure attachment is created through the consistency and availability of the caregiver. An open community style contributes to emotional independence, self-regulation, and aids resilience. However, an insecure parent-child attachment style can form when children learn to expect conflict, rejection, separation, or uncertainty from their caregiver; especially during times of need. Children who have been raised in this manner are more likely to exhibit inflexible or maladaptive responses to stressful life experiences. Both attachment styles have lifelong implications, determining the way in which children tend to respond to social situations including separation from one or both parents.

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BC Bereavement Helpline [Link](#)

**BC Children's Hospital Family
Services
[Link](#)**

**Public Health Agency of
Canada
[Link](#)**

**Everychild.ca – Child Friendly
Resource
[Link](#)**

Separation Due to the Death of a Parent

The death of a parent can lead to internal confusion and suffering for a child in their grief and struggle to make meaning of separation. The degree to which the remaining parent is responsive to their child's needs can dictate the extent to which the child's emotions of sadness, despair, anger, and confusion impact the parent-child bond. Five activities can help children retain a sense of connectedness to their deceased parent: children can imagine a place where the deceased parent may be watching over them (ie. heaven); they may find a way to experience their parent's continued presence; some may try to reach out and have conversations with the deceased parent; still others can be encouraged to reminisce with family members about the characteristics and love they shared; and finally, some children find it helpful to keep objects that belonged to or reminds them of their parent. Perhaps the greatest difference between the death of a parent and other forms of parental separation is the lack of physical closeness that is needed to maintain the parent-child bond. This suggests that a community of support is needed to help remaining family members address gaps in a child's life in order to protect the attachment needs of the child during the grieving process.

Separation Due to Marital Divorce or Separation

Parental separation or divorce can also place strain a child's attachment to their primary caregiver(s). Attachment theory focuses on parents' ability to be nurturing and receptive to the developmental needs of their child. Separation or divorce can lead to changes in parents' availability, living situation, household income, and family relationships. Younger children may be less resilient toward parental separation or divorce due to their relatively immature social and cognitive development and have greater dependence on parents. Research also tells us that children become vulnerable when they experience inconsistencies and lack of availability to their parents since this threatens their ability to develop secure bonds and to regulate themselves amidst emotional and environmental upheavals. Thus, maintaining a secure bond occurs best as parents have the fortitude to foresee, manage, and approach relationship changes sensitively while using an open style of communication.

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**Family Navigator for
Military Families**
[Link](#)

Kelty Mental Health
[Link](#)



**Canadian Association of
Elizabeth Fry Societies**
[Link](#)

John Howard Society
[Link](#)

Separation Due to Military Deployment

Various factors affect the parent-child bond in the context of military deployment. As military assignments vary in duration, intensity, and frequency, families may experience prolonged periods of stress and uncertainty due to associated financial concerns, role strain, and other reduced resources. In many situations, the remaining parent is also under increased pressure to help children understand inconsistencies from their lifestyle prior to a military assignment. Facilitating open climates of communication between the parent who is away and the child can protect the parent-child bond. In many cases, communication can be encouraged through telephone, email, Skype, or letter writing.

Military deployment may also pose challenges when military assignments end. Re-establishing connections can be complex since military personnel may return with physical disabilities, newly acquired mental illness, and the need for prolonged rehabilitation. This may be further complicated by the lack of medical coverage, stigmas surrounding mental illness, confidentiality concerns, lack of mental health professionals trained to deal with military personnel and inadequate resources. This means that the entire family may have to prepare in advance and adjust to the needs of the returning parent.

Separation Due to Parental Involvement in the Criminal Justice System

Perhaps most stigmatizing is when the parent-child attachment bond is under duress due to a parents' involvement in the criminal justice system. Since there are limited communication options available to detained or imprisoned parents due to rules that limit physical contact, the elements needed for a child to develop a secure attachment are not always available. Children who experience this form of prolonged separation are more likely to experience stronger emotions that are more commonly associated with an insecure attachment style. This stems from feelings of fear, anger, sadness, despair, and emotional distancing. Parental involvement in the criminal justice system may also contribute to the formation of insecure attachments due to stressful and frequent changes that often accompany the incarcerated parent. This may include unstable living arrangements, inconsistent care giving, single parenting, invasive and sometimes frightening security procedures when visiting a parent, and lack of open communication or support for understanding the sudden changes happening outside a child's control.

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**First Call BC Child and
Youth Advocacy Coalition**
[Link](#)

Kids Health
[Link](#)

**Helping the 'Invisible
Child'**
[Link](#)



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Stigmatization is a common factor among children who have a parent in prison which is not unlike children who have a parent returning from military deployment with a mental illness. In both situations, children may experience emotions such as embarrassment, fear, confusion, worry, or rage. If children are not supported to help them understand and process these emotions they are at increased risk for experiencing disruptions in their parental attachment. This can be evident through dismissive, avoidant, or disorganised behaviour. Decreasing stigmatisation will support children and families going through the challenges associated with parents in the criminal justice system.

Summary

Secure parent-child attachments provide children with internal resources to support their social and emotional well-being. Parent-child bonds are created slowly and over time, relying heavily on open communication and a caregiver's ability to be sensitive and responsive to a child's distress. When families experience substantial loss or change in daily routines due to death, divorce or separation, military deployment or parental involvement in the criminal justice system it is important to consider how these relationships were prior to, during, and after the occurrence of the initial disruption. Taking this into account can inform caregivers and supporters about how they can respond in ways that bring greater consistency to a child's world, remain sensitive to the child's needs and perceptions, help children adjust to the changes and develop an understanding of their circumstance, while using open forms of communication.