HELPING YOUR CHILD TO LOVE BOTH PARENTS AND THEIR FAMILIES

Children struggle throughout separation in various ways. It is important to allow your child to love both parents and their families (unless there is a significant risk of harm). Here are some ways to support your child's relationship with the other parent and their extended family. This, in turn, helps your child feel safe, stable, and loved.

1) Allow your child to spend time with extended family members on both sides of the family.
2) Leave a framed picture out of your child with their other parent and both sets of their grandparents or extended family members.
3) Mention positive qualities of the other parent and members of your child's extended family. Find a way to value what they have to offer to your child.
4) Recognise and comment on positive qualities that your child received from their other parent or extended family members. For example, "You have your grandmother's talent for art"! The opposite is also true – avoid negative comments such as "You are so angry; you are just like your father!".
5) Encourage your child to remember their other parent's and other extended family members' birthdays, and other important events. Encourage sending a card or making a phone call.
6) Make sure your child responds appropriately when gifts are sent from the other parent or extended family. This is teaching good manners.
7) If the other parent or extended family calls to speak to your child, and you answer the phone, attempt to say a few pleasantries, and keep your emotions out of any exchanges. Remember, your child is listening. Good manners cost nothing and this also teaches your child respectful communication.
8) Separate your negative feelings about your former partner out of communication with them and out of the communication with your child.
9) Do not assume that your former partner and/or their extended family are speaking negatively about you.
10) Correct any inappropriate comments that you may have said with regard to your former partner and/or their extended family. For example, "I was upset with Mum/Pop/Auntie Sue, but I am not as upset anymore. It is getting better all the time.".

Children will pick up on your emotions about your former partner and their extended family. Children will likely react to negative comments and behaviour by internalising (e.g., being quiet, crying a lot, reverting to an earlier developmental stage such as wanting to sleep in your bed, thumb-sucking etc.) or by externalising (e.g., increasing poor behaviour, acting out at home or school, or having "meltdowns").

You can support your child's well-being while going through the separation. Try to incorporate the above strategies into your interactions with your child. Start with one or two strategies and increase over time. Look out for the problems above and seek help if necessary. It is important to allow your child to discuss any concerns or worries and to validate their feelings. This helps them to feel safe, stable, and loved.

Adapted from S. Boyan & A. Termini (1999). Cooperative Parenting Institute