



Supporting Your Child's Emotional and Relational Freedom After Separation

A Reflective Guide for Parents and Caregivers

Author: Amanda Sillars, BPsychSc

Date: 26 August 2026

Version: 1.0

Suggested citation: Sillars, A.N (2026). Supporting Your Child's Emotional and Relational Freedom After Separation: A Reflective Guide for Parents and Caregivers. Eeny Meeny Miney Mo Foundation Ltd.

Purpose of this guide

This guide is for you if you have noticed your child becoming increasingly protective of you, concerned about your emotional wellbeing, or closely aligning with your views about the other parent while pulling away from, avoiding or rejecting that parent or another important family member after separation. That change can have different explanations. A child may distance themselves because of abuse, neglect, family violence, frightening behaviour, persistent caregiving failures or other harmful parenting, and those concerns must be taken seriously. In other situations, the change may develop alongside disrupted contact, exposure to adult grievances or allegations, repeated negative explanations about the other parent, pressure to comfort or protect a parent, or reactions that leave the child feeling that agreement, rejection or loyalty is needed to preserve closeness or avoid distress.

The questions in this guide are designed to help you examine what was happening around the child as the relationship changed, including what they directly experienced, what they heard from adults, what was occurring around contact and transitions, and how your own words, reactions and behaviour may have affected what felt safe for them to express. They also invite you to consider whether your child can speak positively or negatively about either parent, disagree with you, remember both good and difficult experiences, change their mind, or maintain safe family relationships without feeling responsible for protecting you, proving loyalty or managing your emotional response.

Putting your child's needs first after separation involves more than deciding where they spend time. It includes keeping adult conflict, legal matters, financial disputes and allegations with the adults responsible for managing them; not using the child to carry messages, obtain information or report on the other household; and supporting the child to have their own views and relationships where those relationships are safe. It also means noticing when the child has begun monitoring a parent's emotions, avoiding certain subjects, hiding positive experiences, changing what they say between households, or taking responsibility for keeping a parent calm or reassured.

A child may withdraw from, fear or reject a parent because of abuse, neglect, family violence, frightening behaviour, persistent caregiving failures or other harmful parenting. Those possibilities must be taken seriously and, where appropriate, assessed by people with the relevant expertise, especially when it comes to interviewing children. This guide is not intended to question a child's safety concerns or encourage contact where there is a genuine risk of harm. Its purpose is to help a parent examine how the child's relationship developed and changed, including what the child directly experienced, what they were told by adults, when the change became noticeable, what was happening around contact or transitions, and whether the child's language, emotions or behaviour shift according to a parent's reactions.

Children also learn from what happens after they speak, particularly with adults they trust. They notice facial expressions, silence, repeated questioning, criticism, visible distress, changes in affection or withdrawal, and which answers seem to reduce tension or bring approval. During separation, contact arrangements, court proceedings or conversations about the other parent, these reactions can shape what a child feels able to say. A child may begin protecting one parent, withholding information, repeating adult explanations, minimising positive experiences or changing their account between households. Over time, this can make it harder for them to express affection, disappointment, anger, mixed feelings or a different view without first considering how a parent may respond.

The aim is not to require your child to maintain a relationship with someone who has harmed them. It is to reduce the adult emotional and relational burden placed on the child, preserve their ability to speak from their own experience, and make sure they are not required to take responsibility for a parent's emotional wellbeing, manage that parent's reactions, prove loyalty, or abandon safe relationships in order to maintain closeness with the parent they depend on.

How to use the questions

Choose the questions that fit what you have actually noticed, rather than trying to answer every question at once. Use specific examples and think in sequence: what was happening beforehand, what you said or did, how your child responded, and what happened afterwards. Pay particular attention to changes around contact, transitions between households, conversations about the other parent, legal or family events, and moments when your child's view differs from yours. Rather than trying to prove a cause, use the questions to examine whether your responses help your child speak in their own words, maintain safe relationships and disagree without having to manage adult feelings, or whether they may be getting drawn into reporting, reassurance, loyalty pressures or adult disputes.

Practitioner Note: Using This Resource in Counselling and Psychoeducation

This resource may be used in counselling or psychoeducational sessions to support a parent or caregiver to reflect on their own behaviour, emotional responses, communication and boundaries around the child. It is designed to support insight, discussion and practical change, not to assess, diagnose or determine why a child's relationship has changed.

Questions can be selected according to what is relevant to the family and explored through specific examples. The focus should remain on behaviours the parent can recognise and change, such as relying less on the child for emotional support, keeping adult information with adults, reducing questioning about the other household, and responding calmly when the child expresses positive or difficult feelings about the other parent.

A parent's description reflects their own experience and perspective. Where there are court proceedings, allegations or contested parenting matters, counselling should remain focused on therapeutic and psychoeducational work rather than forming conclusions about another family member or the cause of the child's behaviour.

Where information raises concerns about abuse, neglect, family violence, frightening behaviour or other harmful parenting, safeguarding takes priority and appropriate referral or consultation may be required.

Interviewing children requires specific knowledge and skill. This resource should not be turned into a checklist of questions for a child. Where a child is spoken with in counselling, questions should be open, neutral and developmentally appropriate, with care taken to avoid repeated, leading or suggestive questioning.

From Reflection to Change

Reflection should lead to practical changes the child can experience. A parent may identify one or two behaviours to practise between sessions, such as changing how they respond after contact, keeping adult concerns away from the child, reducing requests for information about the other household, or seeking adult support rather than reassurance from the child.

Across sessions, the focus can remain on whether those changes are helping the child speak more freely, express mixed feelings and maintain safe relationships without managing a parent's emotions or loyalty expectations.

1. Understanding changes in your child's relationships

When a child's relationship with a parent or important family member changes significantly after separation, there can be many reasons for that change. Some relate to the child's direct experiences, including abuse, neglect, family violence, frightening behaviour or other harmful parenting. Others can develop alongside disrupted contact, changes in routines, adult explanations, conflict, allegations or the child's efforts to manage relationships and emotions within the family.

When a child says something concerning, a parent's facial expression, tone, questions, distress, anger or assumptions can influence how the child interprets the event and how they describe it later. Children may misunderstand an event, use words imprecisely, repeat an adult explanation, or adjust what they say in response to approval, distress, reassurance or attention. After separation, some children are especially sensitive to what restores closeness or reduces tension with a parent. This does not mean their description of what happened should be dismissed. Adults can take what a child says seriously while still responding calmly, avoiding repeated or leading questions, and not supplying an interpretation before the circumstances are clear. This helps preserve the child's own description of what they saw, heard, experienced or felt, rather than allowing an adult's reaction or assumptions to become part of how the event is later understood or described.

If a child reports harm, or there is a reasonable concern about abuse, neglect, family violence or other harmful parenting, that concern should be taken seriously and addressed appropriately. Where there is no identified safety reason to restrict a relationship, the child benefits from adults who do not encourage further distancing, draw them into adult disputes, or make affection toward another family member feel disloyal. The aim is to protect the child's safety while preserving their ability to form, maintain and revise their own views of important relationships from their own experiences over time.

- ❑ When I first noticed my child's relationship with the other parent changing, what was I saying, doing or communicating about that parent around the same time?
- ❑ When my child resists seeing or speaking with the other parent, how do my words, facial expressions, questions or decisions influence what happens next?
- ❑ When handovers involve arguments, criticism, visible tension or hostility between adults, how might my own words, tone or behaviour be shaping what my child comes to expect about seeing the other parent, and could contact itself begin to feel linked with conflict or emotional stress?
- ❑ If my child blocks calls, ignores messages, rejects gifts or pulls away from affection from the other parent, how do my responses discourage the distancing, leave it unchallenged, or make it feel supported?
- ❑ How have my own feelings about the other parent affected the way I support my child's relationships with grandparents, siblings or other family members connected with them?
- ❑ When my child pulls away from a relationship that was previously close, do my responses leave room for them to remember affection and positive experiences, or do I make it harder for those parts of the relationship to remain part of their story?

2. Keeping adult burdens with adults

Children can become highly attuned to a parent's emotional state after separation, particularly when there has been conflict, distress, court involvement or major changes in family life. A child may start watching closely for signs that a parent is upset, offering reassurance, staying physically close, avoiding topics that cause distress, carrying messages between adults, or volunteering information about the other household. What can look like maturity or protectiveness may gradually place the child in an adult emotional role, where they feel responsible for helping a parent cope.

This can develop without a parent deliberately asking the child to take on that responsibility. Children notice when certain subjects bring sadness, anger, anxiety or relief, and may adapt what they say or do in response. They may come to believe that withholding positive experiences, agreeing with a parent's view, avoiding time away from them, or bringing back information helps maintain emotional security or prevents further upset. Over time, this can interfere with the child's ability to separate their own feelings and relationships from the emotional needs of the adults around them.

Keeping adult burdens with adults means making clear, through both words and behaviour, that the child is not responsible for a parent's emotional wellbeing. Emotional support, legal concerns, financial disputes, relationship grievances and communication between households should remain with adults. Children need to know that they can care about both parents, spend time apart from a caregiver, speak openly about their experiences and maintain safe family relationships without feeling responsible for keeping a parent calm, reassured or emotionally protected.

- ❑ When my child comforts, reassures or tries to protect me, how do I respond? How do I make it clear that they are not responsible for keeping me calm, happy or emotionally okay, or might my response leave them feeling that I need them to look after me?
- ❑ When contact with the other parent, time away from me or affection toward them comes up, could my reaction make my child feel they need to change what they say or do to protect me?
- ❑ What have I said, shown or allowed my child to overhear about the separation, court proceedings, allegations, finances, relationship history or problems with the other parent, and how might that information be shaping the way they now see that parent?
- ❑ During times when I have felt hurt, frightened, angry or overwhelmed, have I turned to my child for reassurance, advice, messages, information about the other parent or emotional support? If I have, what position might that have placed my child in?
- ❑ When my child becomes distressed about being away from me, how do my own reactions affect them? How do I help them feel safe being apart from me and connected with other important people, or might my anxiety, reluctance or need for reassurance make separation harder for them?

3. Supporting your child to form their own views

A child's understanding of the other parent can shift after separation, particularly when they are trying to make sense of conflict, disrupted contact, allegations or information they would not normally be expected to manage. You may notice their language becoming more absolute, more adult-like, or increasingly difficult to connect to something they personally saw, heard or experienced. Children often look to trusted adults to explain confusing events, so repeated interpretations, labels or explanations can gradually become incorporated into the way they understand the relationship.

This does not mean a child's concerns are invalid or that their words should be discounted. A child may have experienced behaviour that genuinely frightened, hurt or confused them. The important distinction is between what they experienced for themselves and the meanings that may later have been added by adults. For example, a disappointing event may come to represent a much broader conclusion about the parent's motives or character, particularly when the child repeatedly hears the same interpretation from people they trust.

Supporting your child to form their own views means giving them room to describe events in their own words, ask questions, hold mixed feelings and revise their understanding as they grow. They should not feel pressured to adopt a positive view of a parent who has harmed them, but neither should they be expected to absorb adult conclusions as their own. Children benefit when adults help them separate what they know from direct experience from what they have been told, while allowing positive memories, difficult experiences, disagreement and changing views to exist alongside one another.

- ❑ **When my child describes the other parent in entirely negative terms, how do I respond? Do I ask what they have personally experienced, or do my reactions make it easier for a one-sided view to become fixed?**
- ❑ **When my child uses words, labels or explanations about the other parent, do I recognise when that language has come from me, professionals, relatives or other adults, and consider how much of it the child has actually formed for themselves?**
- ❑ **When my child tells me something about the other parent, do I help them distinguish between what they directly saw, heard or experienced and what they have been told, assumed or concluded?**
- ❑ **If my child now describes experiences that were once ordinary, enjoyable or loving as harmful, unsafe or manipulative, what have I said, explained or reinforced that may have contributed to that change in meaning?**
- ❑ **When my child offers a different explanation for something that happened, or sees the other parent's point of view, how do I react? How do I leave room for that thinking, or do I correct, dismiss or redirect them back toward my own interpretation?**
- ❑ **What legal, therapeutic, psychological or moral language have I used or allowed my child to hear about the other parent, the separation, allegations, court proceedings or contact, and how might that language be shaping the way they now understand the situation?**

4. Making it safe for your child to think, feel and relate freely

Some children begin checking a parent's non-verbal cues before talking about the other parent. You may notice your child hesitating when describing a good experience, hiding messages or affection, changing their account depending on which parent is present, or appearing relieved after rejecting contact. Notice when these reactions occur and what is happening around them. They may become more visible when your child returns from the other household, receives a call or gift, says they miss the other parent, asks to spend time with them, talks about a school or family event, or expresses a view that differs from yours.

Children do not need to be directly told to take sides. They can learn from repeated reactions. A sigh, facial expression, silence, repeated questioning, criticism, withdrawal, visible distress, or increased warmth and approval after a particular answer can teach a child which responses reduce tension, avoid upsetting a parent, or preserve closeness.

Putting your child's needs first means making room for both positive and difficult experiences without requiring them to manage your emotions. Avoid questioning them in ways that make contact feel like something they must report on and be careful not to reinforce rejection through extra approval, reassurance or closeness. Show through both your words and your behaviour that your child can love, miss, disagree with, feel angry with, enjoy time with, or change their view of either parent without fearing a change in their relationship with you.

- ❑ Can my child disagree with me about the other parent without worrying that I will become angry, upset, withdrawn, critical or harder to be around?
- ❑ When my child says they miss, love or enjoyed spending time with the other parent, what do they see or hear from me in that moment?
- ❑ Could anything in my past reactions make my child feel they need to hide enjoyable contact, messages, memories or affection involving the other parent?
- ❑ Before or after contact, do my questions give my child space to tell me what they want to share, or have I created an expectation that they report back about the other parent, their home or what happened there?
- ❑ What changes in my response when my child refuses contact or agrees with my view of the other parent, compared with when they express warmth, interest, affection or a different opinion?
- ❑ If my child looks at me before answering a question about the other parent, what might they have learned from my facial expressions, tone, comments or previous reactions?
- ❑ Can my child say something positive about the other parent without feeling they need to soften it, explain it, apologise for it or follow it with something negative?
- ❑ If my child changed their mind about the other parent, questioned something I had told them, or wanted a closer relationship with them, what would my past responses lead them to expect from me?
- ❑ Have I made it unmistakably clear, through both my words and my behaviour, that my child can love, miss, enjoy time with and have a relationship with the other parent without hurting or betraying me?

5. Responding to hostility, monitoring and punitive behaviour

When a child moves beyond wanting distance and begins monitoring, humiliating, discrediting or trying to create consequences for the other parent, they are becoming more actively involved in the adult conflict. This may appear in family conversations, messages or social media through checking where the other parent is, forwarding screenshots, reporting who they are with, collecting information, involving siblings or relatives, making humiliating comments, or wanting the parent to experience legal, social or other consequences.

A child can have genuine anger, fear or grievances while still being drawn into behaviour that places them in an inappropriate role. Monitoring, gathering information or trying to influence what happens to a parent can move the child away from simply expressing their own feelings and into adult processes that should not be theirs to manage. That involvement can deepen if the information they collect is welcomed, used or treated as helpful by the adults around them.

Where a child discloses information that raises a genuine safety concern, it should be taken seriously and addressed through appropriate safeguarding, legal or therapeutic processes. The child should not become responsible for investigating, gathering evidence, monitoring the other parent or influencing what consequences follow. Putting the child's needs first means listening carefully to what they have experienced, setting clear limits around humiliating, punitive or monitoring behaviour, and keeping investigation, evidence-gathering and adult decision-making with adults.

- ❑ When my child speaks about the other parent with intense hostility or contempt, how do I respond? How do I help them stay with what they personally experienced, or do my reactions strengthen an entirely negative view?
- ❑ If my child insults, humiliates or tries to punish the other parent, how do I set clear limits on that behaviour while still listening to what they are feeling and what has led to it?
- ❑ If my child monitors the other parent's movements, relationships, activities or online posts, how do I discourage that behaviour, or have I shown interest in, accepted or used the information they bring back?
- ❑ Have I ever asked my child for information about the other parent, accepted information I knew they had gathered for me, or allowed them to involve siblings, relatives or others in monitoring, reporting on or acting against that parent?

A final reflection

- ❑ **What do my words, reactions and everyday behaviour show my child about whether they are free to love, miss, disagree with, question, remember positive experiences with, or change their view of either parent?**
- ❑ **Are there times when my child might feel they need to protect me, prove loyalty, hide affection, agree with my view, or manage my reaction in order to preserve closeness or avoid upsetting me?**

Putting your child first does not mean expecting them to feel the same way about both parents, encouraging contact that is unsafe, or minimising disclosures of abuse, neglect, family violence or harmful parenting. Where a child reports harm or there are reasonable concerns for their safety, those concerns need to be taken seriously and responded to appropriately. At the same time, separation can expose children to adult distress, competing accounts, legal disputes and pressure about family relationships. Parents can help by keeping those adult burdens away from the child and allowing them to describe their own experiences without being pushed toward either a positive or negative view of the other parent.

Pay particular attention to everyday moments when your child returns from contact, mentions the other parent, receives a message or gift, disagrees with you, remembers something positively, or changes their mind. Can they talk about what happened in their own words without feeling they need to protect you or anticipate your reaction? Can they express affection, disappointment, anger or mixed feelings about either parent? Where grandparents, siblings and other family relationships are safe, can those relationships continue without the child feeling that closeness with one person means disloyalty to another?

Children should not be placed in the role of managing a parent's emotional wellbeing, carrying adult allegations or legal disputes, gathering information about another household, or distancing themselves from safe family relationships to demonstrate loyalty. Equally, they should never be pressured to maintain a relationship with someone who has harmed them. The aim is to protect the child's safety while preserving their ability to form views and relationships from their own experiences, rather than from the emotional or relational demands of the adults around them.

A child should not have to protect one parent, prove loyalty, hide affection or give up safe relationships to preserve closeness with another. They need the freedom to love, question, remember, disagree and form their own views from their own experiences.

emmm.org.au

Important safeguard

Any significant fear, avoidance, rejection or marked change in a child's relationship should be understood over time rather than from a single statement, behaviour or brief assessment. A longitudinal assessment should consider the child's prior relationship history, what they directly saw, heard or experienced, when and how the change developed, what was occurring around contact and transitions, what information they were exposed to, and whether their presentation changes across people, settings or periods of time.

Abuse, neglect, family violence, frightening behaviour and other harmful parenting must be actively considered as possible explanations and, where concerns are identified, addressed through appropriate safeguarding and assessment by suitably qualified practitioners. Interviewing children also requires specific skill. Questions should be open, neutral and developmentally appropriate, with care taken to avoid repeated, leading or suggestive questioning that may shape the child's responses or introduce adult interpretations. The child should be given space to describe events in their own words, and practitioners should distinguish between what the child directly experienced, what they inferred, and what they were told by others.

This guide should not be used to dismiss a child's report of harm, pressure a child to resume contact, or substitute for a careful longitudinal assessment of safety, the child's direct experiences, the development of their responses over time, and other plausible explanations for the change.