

Where You Are

S4 Episode 7: No Shortage of Questions: Supporting Your Child During Separation and Divorce

TRANSCRIPT:

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Dr. Ashley Miller: Kids want to know that their secure base, their parent, is still there for them. That both parents or caregivers are still there for them. That's the key, key message. 'So things may look different. We might live in different places, we might have different things in the room, but as a parent, I'm here. I love you. I'm there for you just as much as before.'

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Bryn Askwith: This is Where You Are, a podcast that helps families and their children promote their mental health and wellness. I'm Bryn Askwith,

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Char Black: And I'm Char Black. As longtime listeners may know, every season, we like to take an episode to answer some common questions from parents that we get at the Kelty Center. This season, we decided to put together three bite sized episodes of Where You Are, to explore a few key topics that we get recurring questions on. To help us answer these questions, we're joined by child psychiatrist and family therapist, Dr. Ashley Miller

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Bryn Askwith: Today on Where You Are, we'll explore strategies that parents and caregivers can use to help support their child as their family deals with separation and divorce. So let's get into that conversation.

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Char Black: A warm welcome again to Dr. Ashley Miller. Thanks for making the time to be here on the podcast.

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Dr. Ashley Miller: It's my pleasure.

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Char Black: Dr. Miller, as separation and divorce bring about big changes for kids, they can be a highly emotional time and tough life event, but the good news is that parents and caregivers can play a key role in helping to support their child's wellbeing and mental health, both during

and after separation and divorce. Before we focus on how parents can help, can you share some of the common struggles that kids face in the event of a separation and divorce that can impact their mental health and wellness?

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Dr. Ashley Miller: Young kids, especially honestly, are quite focused on themselves and their own needs, especially at the beginning. So really practical things, like forgetting a stuffy at one house and then they don't have it at the other, or not wanting to pack their bag to go between two houses. Even older kids struggle with that. There's one kid I saw who had all his drum equipment at one home and then couldn't play drums if he was at the other home. So that is a huge thing. Of course, having to potentially move, changes in financial circumstances, all of those practical things can affect kids. Then of course, on the emotional side, there's a lot of just disruption to missing one parent when they're not with them, arguments that can happen between co- parents as they try to work things out. These are hard. And then of course kids also are attuned to what's going on with their parents and may not be able to put it into words, but might have fears or be sad if they see their parent distressed.

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Bryn Askwith: Yeah, I completely understand those points. My parents separated when I was a little bit older, and as a kid we sometimes very much are sponges and pick up on emotions and things that are going on in the household. So I think those are things that can definitely impact mental health and wellness for children and youth. Dr. Miller, what strategies can be helpful to parents as they support their kids during a divorce or separation? How, as parents, can you help your kids cope in these moments?

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Dr. Ashley Miller: Yeah, I mean, parents are really by and large, so thoughtful in trying to do what's right for their families. Nobody plans to get separated or divorced at some point, and parents have a lot of worries about what that's going to mean for their kids and for themselves. And I think like almost everything to do with child and youth mental health, it's so important for parents to have the supports that they need first before even really trying to focus on the child too much. What I mean by too much is sometimes parents will say, "Well, I just need to do what's right for the child," and they sort of jump over themselves and forget that they're a human being with needs too. That can be counterproductive because parents need to have their support for their own grief, or their own anger, or whatever strong emotions they're feeling they may need support. That's really practical around childcare, around financial resources.

If they're leaving a situation that's been violent or dangerous in any way, that always comes first. Needing to find the right support and safety for themselves. In terms of helping kids more specifically, I think it's also important to know, as a parent that kids can do well with separation

and divorce. The biggest thing that kids need is to know that even though her co- parents aren't together, the kids are still loved and are every bit as much as safe as they were before, and in certain circumstances, maybe they're even safer. Kids want to know that their secure base, their parent is still there for them, that both parents are caregivers are still there for them. That's the key, key message. 'So things may look different. We might live in different places, we might have different things, but as a parent, I'm here. I love you. I'm there for you as just as much as before.'

I think though, that's the key conversation. And then you have to back it up with actions. So often, because co- parents are angry at each other, there's a lot of hard feelings between them, that can really trip people up from their best intentions. And it can be hard to not put kids in the middle of that or to not assume the worst of the ex. As much as possible, thinking about what does my child need and trying not to let negative feelings about their other parent get in the way of providing that for the child.

My colleague and friend, Dr. Adela Franz has this saying that she'll sometimes use with separated parents who are at war with each other. " Do you love your child more than you hate your ex?" And I find it really sort of jolts people to think, " Well, of course I do." And well, if that's the case, which I would have to say it always is, it helps people have a little bit more perspective on what they're saying and how they're behaving, so that the child really can get what they need, which is to know that the parent has unconditional love and support for them.

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Char Black: Great. Thank you Dr. Miller. I love how you highlighted kind of the child feeling safe and ensuring that you do the actions that support their feelings of safety.

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Bryn Askwith: Yeah, and there are some great resources on the Kelty website around this, and we'll definitely add them in our show notes today, including actually a blog post by yourself, Dr. Miller, that can be really helpful for parents and caregivers on managing things post-divorce.

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Char Black: Dr. Miller at the Kelty Centre, we received a question from a parent. Just going to read that out to you and perhaps you can offer some insights related to this question. "I'm wondering what effects separation and divorce can have on kids' mental health and wellness over the long term. I want my child to have healthy relationships in the future when they're an adult. Is there anything I can be doing as a parent now to help with that?"

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Dr. Ashley Miller: Yeah, again, such thoughtfulness about the future, and all parents want their kids to be happy and well. So what we know, and of course it's not a perfect science, but is that if

kids are exposed to a lot of conflict and negative emotion between caregivers growing up, and everyone has conflict, but I mean a lot of conflict to the point where it is quite distressing for everyone in the household, including the child, then they can do better when the parents are separated and parenting separately. So it's not a given that divorce and separation are always a negative thing. There are extremes where it's actually the best thing that can happen for parents and for the child. If things are relatively stable from the child's point of view, they might be rocky under the surface, but if they look pretty good for the child, it may be more disruptive when the parents separate, especially initially because in the child's mind, things were fine before.

If parents are able to have that capacity to stand back, think about themselves like reflect about themselves, reflect about the child, what we call mentalization, having a sense of the child's mind, their feelings, talking to them about feelings and experiences and being there for them in this secure base kind of way where, "I'm there for you if you need something," there's no reason that kids can't go on to have good relationships later in life, even if their parents have separated. So it's really more that quality of how a parent relates to their child rather than the absolute of, are they married, are they separated, are they partnered or not? So I think there's a lot of hope and we don't need to despair when there's a separation or divorce that that's going to scar a child forever.

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Bryn Askwith: So Dr. Miller, on this topic, any final thoughts or words of wisdom you'd like to share with our listeners?

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Dr. Ashley Miller: Well, I think at last look, I mean it's about 50% of families do deal with separation and divorce. I may not even be correct about the statistics, but it's a pretty high number and I don't think we should add that extra layer of guilt and self blame as parents on top of the pain already that we're, we're going through for the separation. There's so much that we can do through a separation divorce, and I say through because it's a process. It starts often months, if not years before the separation itself and then continues years after. But if we can be kind to ourselves that sometimes things don't work between adults, but it doesn't mean that it can't still be a very secure and stable and loving parent- child relationship with both partners. So I hope parents will give themselves some grace if they're going through separation, divorce or if that might be in the future.

And also, if there's lots of conflict in the home, there are lots of resources and ways to support parents through couples therapy or individual therapy to help mediate that. And kids just learn so much from conflict resolution. Whether you're together or not, figuring out how to get along with another adult human being while co- parenting kids is one of the hardest tasks in life, and

whether you're doing it while you're still together or you're doing it after you are apart, that's the greatest gift you can give your child or children. If you figure out how to resolve conflict, they'll be so much better for it.

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Char Black: Great. Thank you Dr. Miller for your final thoughts and words of wisdom, and thank you so much for joining us today.

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Dr. Ashley Miller: Thanks for having me.

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Bryn Askwith: Thanks.

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Char Black: Head to our show notes to find any of the resources mentioned in today's episode. If you're looking for more resources on supporting your child during separation or divorce, head to our website, Keltymentalhealth.ca and search this topic. You'll find resources, toolkits, and more for parents and caregivers. Thanks again to all our Where You Are listeners. And thanks to Bryn, my fellow co- host.

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Bryn Askwith: Thanks, Char. This episode of Where You Are is brought to you by BC Children's Kelty Mental Health Resource Center. Our show is produced and edited by Emily Morantz with Audio Engineering by Sam Seguin, audio production by JAR Audio. If you enjoy this episode, leave us a rating wherever you might be listening now.

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