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Supporting Your Children With Separation and Divorce: Tips for Parents

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Summary: Separation and divorce happens often, and can be an extremely stressful time for children and youth. Fortunately, there are things that parents can do that can help children and youth cope better with a separation and divorce.

Introduction

Separation and divorce happens.
In North America, close to 40% of relationships eventually end up in separation or divorce within 15-years (Kreider et al., 2002; Department of Justice, 1997).
On one hand, separation and divorce can be extremely stressful for children and youth:

- Lack of control: Their family, as they know it, is changing profoundly in so many ways, and they have no control over the situation.
- Blame, guilt and shame: In order to gain a sense of being in control, some children may blame themselves. Overwhelmed parents may also wrongly blame children when upset. Any of this is a massive burden for a child to take on.
- Changes in routine: There are generally changes in routine, where children live, when they see each parent. Any change in routine can be very stressful, especially for younger children or for those who have a hard time with change.
- Fears of abandonment: Children may fear that parents are leaving each other, and as a result, parents could leave the child too. In far too many situations, this is a justified fear.
- Conflict between parents: Any conflict, tension and fighting between parents is really hard for children and youth. Every child wants to be able to love both their parents. Conflict can make them feel that they have to choose sides. Or may them upset at both parents for fighting.
- Parents may be more stressed and less available emotionally and physically. Being a single parent is challenging, as the parent on their own has to provide for the household's needs (e.g. income, housing, food). Running a household alone generally leaves less time much time for children and youth as before. Or when the parent is available, they may be exhausted and emotionally drained.

On the other hand, there can be many benefits. There are many situations where parents should separate and divorce. When separation and divorce reduces conflict between parents, then the children and youth may benefit in the long run. Less conflict generally leads to happier parents, which can then allow children and youth to have happier and healthier relationships with parents and other family members.

Terms

Separation:

- Legal separation is when a couple decides to live apart from each other. The law recognizes couples as legally separated if the couple tells family and friends that they are separated.

Divorce:

- This is a process that officially ends a marriage. In a divorce, spouses must divide their property and make arrangements for child custody, alimony and settlement of debts. In Canada, a couple can file for divorce if they have been separated for at least one year.

Are You Thinking about Separation?

Is there any possibility of working things out?

- If so, would it be helpful to speak with a marriage or family counsellor, to help work through the pros and cons.

There are certain situations where a couple should separate. Examples include:

- Emotional, physical or sexual abuse by a parent, towards either the other parent or the children.

Legal grounds for divorce include:

- Living apart for at least one year;
- Adultery (cheating)
- Physical or mental cruelty.

You've Decided You Want to Separate… Now What?

Once you or your partner decide to separate or divorce, you'll both have to think about the following things:

- What is happening with the parental home;
- Where is each parent going to live, and who do they live with;
- How your child(ren) will be cared for and where they will live
- Who will make decisions for your child(ren)
- Financial support, including child support and spousal support
- How you will divide property

Ideally, you will have a plan for the above things before you break the news to your children.

Breaking the News About Separation/Divorce to the Children

Think about a good time for both parents to meet with the children.

- There is no perfect time, but a less bad time might be Friday after school.
- Bad times would be important events or anniversaries, e.g. a child's birthday, Christmas, etc. Separation/divorce is a stressful conversation, and it is usually best to not have them associate separation/divorce with their birthday, for example.

How to break the news

- Meet your children together with your spouse.
- Consider the "sandwich technique", where you start with something positive, then the negative, then finish with positive.
    - Good news:
        - Tell them that as their parents, you love them very much and nothing will ever change that.
    - Bad news

        - Tell them that you have something difficult to tell them and that you have made a decision to separate / divorce.
        - Explain it is not the children's fault.
    - Good news
        - Tell them that this is for the best, as there will be less tension and stress between parents, that you will both continue to be their parents; that you will both continue being connected with them.

Other details to review include:

- Living arrangements
    - Tell them where each parent will be living.
    - With younger children, parents will need to decide where children live. With younger children, they will usually live with their primary caregiver. Don't make younger children have to decide about where to live as this causes unnecessary stress on them.
    - With teenagers and young adults, who have increased needs for autonomy, you will want to see if they have a preference, and respect that preference if possible.
    - Try to come up with the same expectations and rules for both households. Children and youth do best with consistent limits and structure.
    - Work out a regular schedule of visits, when children will be with each parent.
    - Make sure your children have private space for their things in each household. Try to keep essentials in each house (like toothbrushes, toiletries and school supplies) so children and youth won't have the stress of always having to "live out of a suitcase".

- School
    - Will they be staying at the same school or going to a different school.

Tips on Co-Parenting

After the separation/divorce, parents shift into a new relationship, that of being co-parents.
Communication Tips

- Use a communication book to make sure that children's school commitments and activities (like birthday parties or sports) are shared between both parents. This can also make it easier to communicate if difficult feelings (like hurt, anger, or jealousy) tend to come out when the parents interact in person.

Relationship Tips

- Make sure that each child gets to spend regular one-on-one time with each parent. One-on-one time is important. This is when children and youth are most likely to express their true feelings, giving you the chance to listen and support your children.
- Try to see your relationship with your former partner as a professional, business-like, co-parenting relationship. Focus on the present: Co-parenting the children. Don't focus on the past: Talking about past hurts and resentments usually doesn't resolve anything and just brings up pain.
- Keep the children out of any conflict between parents. Involving children in parent's conflicts, or wanting them to take sides is harmful to the children.
- Be assertive (and not aggressive or hostile) when interacting with your former partner.
- For example…

Instead of…	Try instead…
• Getting angry with your former partner if they are often late.	Share how you feel or how it affects you (or the children), e.g. "When you're late picking up the kids, they get very worried that they'll be late for school. And it makes me late for work", or "I find it very difficult to make plans when you don't drop the kids off when you said you would." Make the request. Politely, calmly and respectfully request what you'd like, e.g. "Would it possible for you to…" "I need you to…" "I was hoping …." "I would appreciate it if you could…"

- Is your other partner simply unreasonable? If so, reach out to your support network.

Supporting Your Kids through Separation / Divorce: General Tips

Do’s

- Do remember that children come first. When parents are overwhelmed, our childrens’ needs can become overlooked. However, meeting their needs now through this difficult time, it will actually make your life easier in the long run by ensuring that they are healthy and coping the best they can.
- Are you finding it difficult to meet their needs because you are too overwhelmed?
    - If so, then reach out to your family, friends. Ask them for their support to help you out, or to help out with the children.
    - Are you still struggling?
        - Consider reaching out to a professional, e.g. family physician, counsellor.
- Do accept your children’s feelings.
    - Are the children angry at their parents? Accept their anger. Underneath the anger is sadness at this massive change in their lives.
    - Empathize, validate, accept: “What I get from you is that you are feeling very angry. I can see why you might feel this way. I accept that.”
    - Offer support based on what they need: “I’m here for you. If you need space, I’ll give you space. If you want to talk, I’m here to listen. Or we can just sit together without talking. Whatever you need.”

Don’ts

- Don’t ask younger children to decide which parent to stay with. It puts too much pressure on them by forcing them to choose between parents. In general, young children should be with whichever parent was the primary caregiver.
- Don’t say bad things about the other parent (whether true or not), or blame the other parent in front of your child. You may be feeling hurt, upset and angry at the other parent, and it might be tempting to vent your frustrations in front of your child or teen. This can be very harmful to children for a few reasons:
    - Children want and need to have a positive relationship with both parents. A child who has a poor relationship with one parent is more likely to have poor self-esteem and problems with trust.
    - If you are blaming, negative and critical, this negative energy can have a negative impact on your relationship with your child. If the other parent stays calm, then you end up looking bad. If the other parent retaliates, conflict gets worse, which is also stresses your child or teen.
- Don’t discuss financial issues with your children or youth. Separation and divorce are costly, and parents may feel tempted to share these issues with their children. Unfortunately, telling children and youth about financial stresses may end up making them feel more nervous and insecure. Instead, tell your children that the adults are in charge, and they will take care of the financial issues.
- Don’t expect your children to be little adults. For example, do not tell your son, “You’re the man of the house now.”

Living Away from Your Children?

After the separation/divorce, are you living away from your children?
If so, it is still very important to still be a part of their lives. The more you can invest in their lives now when they are young, the greater your investment will pay off in the long run, for everyone involved.
Children and youth need and want both parents in their lives. When parents are not involved in their children’s lives, children may feel that they are unloved.
This can lead to sadness, anxiety, and troubles with self-acceptance, and can lead to long-term problems in their lives.
The good news is that there are many things that you can do such as:

- Make the effort to see them regularly. There is no more powerful way of saying “I love you” than by seeing your child regularly.
- Connect with them regularly: If it is not possible to see them regularly, at least connect with your child often

in other ways such as social media, send letters, texts, emails, talk on the phone or skype. Regular contact is another way to say, “You’re important to me, and I love you.”
- Keep your promises. If you make promises to your child, then keep them. If you have made plans to visit with your child, then do not cancel those plans at the last minute.
- Remind your children that they are important. Send letters and pictures that your children can keep to remind them about your relationship. Remember important days. Learn about their friends and activities.
- Celebrate holidays and birthdays with your child as often as possible.

When Parents Start Seeing Other People

When parents start seeing other people after a separation/divorce, this can be very stressful for the children. They might:

- Feel jealous because deep down, they are afraid that the new person will compete for your attention.
- Do reassure your children by telling them that friends and new romantic partners will 1) never replace a parent’s love for their children, nor will 2) the partner replace the other parent.
- Do make sure that dating does not take away from the time and relationship that you have with your children -- remember, that your children come first.
- Do accept if your child is feeling jealous or upset when you start dating. Help them process and accept this through empathy, validation, acceptance. You might say: “What I get from you is that you are upset about ___. That’s natural. Sometimes people feel upset because they are worried about ___, or scared about ____. “

Do’s

Don’ts

- Don’t get upset with your child or teen if he becomes jealous when you begin dating. Children naturally are afraid that they will lose the affection and love of a parent who is sharing some of their time and affection with someone else.
- Don’t introduce your new partner to your children until the relationship looks like a serious, longer-term relationship. It is very stressful for children and youth to be exposed to several, different romantic partners.

When to Seek Professional Help

Separation and divorce is not an easy process to go through.
Are you finding yourself overwhelmed?

- If so, then reach out to your family, friend and support network, including health professionals.

Is your partner abusive, neglect or completely unreasonable?

- Consider reaching out to health professionals as well as domestic violence / abuse services.

Resources

Books for parents

- Mom’s House, Dad’s House: Making Two Homes for Your Child, by Isolina Ricci
- The Coparenting Toolkit, Isolina Ricci

Books for children and youth

- What happens next? Information for Kids about Separation and Divorce, by the Department of Justice Canada, available at: http://canada.justice.gc.ca/eng/pi/fcy-fea/lib-bib/pub/book-livre/title-titre.html

About This Document

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