

## Healthy Separation and Divorce – Protecting Children from Parental Conflict

AS SEPARATION AND DIVORCE is a process that can go on for several years, the period following a formal separation involves many life changes and decisions - and all of them have an impact on younger and older children.

### **Because Life Goes On... (Public Health Agency of Can.)**

The challenge of being a parent during separation and divorce may sometimes seem overwhelming. When times are hard, it is important for parents to remember that all children face challenges as they grow up. Some move from school to school, from community to community. Some experience the death of a family member - a grandparent or older relative, and sometimes a parent or sibling. Some face serious illness. And through it all, they cope and learn and mature. Children have a tremendous capacity to meet the challenges life throws them. They have a remarkable ability to bounce back from difficult experiences -and this ability grows out of being loved and cared for.

Use your good judgment and common sense, try some of the suggestions outlined here and reach out for the support and assistance you need from friends, family, professionals and community resources.

Despite the difficulties and pain, separation and divorce - like other challenges in life - can provide opportunities for growth, for both parents and children. Just as you may gain confidence, acquire new strengths and develop new abilities at this time in your life, so will your children. By helping them deal with divorce, you are giving them the skills to manage other challenges in life.

#### **Because life goes on...**

Because we are called to respond to its challenges... Because we best see the light with our eyes wide open.

### **Parental Conflict Is Harmful**

(Public Health Agency of Can) Many parents don't realize how upsetting continued conflict with their former partner can be to *all children*, including infants and toddlers. You may assume that because very young children cannot understand the arguments they hear, they will be unaffected by them. In fact, although toddlers rarely understand the details of angry words between parents, *and grown children rarely understand the complex issues between parents*, they feel the emotions very strongly. It is important that you try to keep a calm, positive attitude in your child's presence.

## **A Need to Please**

Pre-teens may also try to cope by maintaining good relationships with both parents at all costs. They may try to gain praise and attention by being overly attentive and helpful to one or both parents and at school. By showing so much self-control and sympathy, they often sacrifice their own needs, assertiveness and strength of character.

## **Developmental Needs Neglected**

Although children of this age long to be treated like adults, parents need to resist the temptation to involve them in adult problems. For example, letting them choose the colour of paint for their room is far different from involving them in financial affairs. While many children are willing to provide support to their parents, they are too young to take on this kind of responsibility. Be aware that children who grow up "taking care of their parents" run the risk of emotional difficulties later in life. To make sure your children's developmental needs are being met at this age, encourage them to make friends and to take part in activities outside the family.

## **Emotional Costs of Conflict**

As with children of any age, the emotional costs of allowing pre-teens to become directly involved in adult conflicts can be considerable and long lasting. Pre-teens experience conflicting loyalties. They may experience strong feelings of guilt, disloyalty and fear. When parents draw children into the conflict, it places children in the unbearable position of choosing one parent over the other. Children of this age are not ready to handle this power or cope with the stress it creates. (Public Health Agency of Can)

Research shows that children's success in adjusting to separation and divorce depends very much on the success of their parents' adjustment. If you are coping well, they will cope well too. Your biggest tasks are to show that you have good coping skills and to encourage your children to keep on communicating with you. It will help if you remember that your children have feelings similar to yours – sadness at "losing" the family, anger, guilt, fear of the unknown, and confusion and frustration about decisions and events that they cannot control. (Cdn Mental Health Assn)

Children cope in a variety of ways and will ask a variety of questions. Very young children will want to know, "What will happen to me, and who will look after me now?" Older children may ask, "Who caused this? What about my future? Where will we live? Is there enough money for all of us?" How you answer these questions and back up the answers with actions will be very important to your children. (Cdn Mental Health Assn)

As their parent, you can say a number of things to your children to help them through this difficult time. These things need to be said to both very young children and to teenagers to help them get past feelings of guilt, insecurity and the fear of being abandoned. (Cdn Mental Health Assn)

- **Encourage and support your children's relationship with your ex-spouse as well as yourself.** Separation and divorce often cause intense, negative emotions between spouses. However, it is important not to criticize your ex-spouse or undermine them. You and your ex-spouse should remember that, although you are no longer married, you will still be linked together for many years as parents. You, therefore, still need to cooperate with each other to meet your children's needs. (Cdn Mental Health Assn)

(Public Health Agency of Can.) YOUR CHILDREN NEED both parents in their lives. But when your divorce is bitter, your continuing contact with the other parent can be very painful. That's one reason why parents need to rely on friends and other support networks to work through difficult feelings. Remember, too, that the passage of time can be a great healer.

Yet, however difficult it may be, working together as parents while you are separating as a couple is very, very important. When children are involved, your divorce ends the marriage, not the family. Your relationship as parents continues.

"My parents never liked to talk directly with each other. My mother would tell me things to go tell my Dad, like for instance my Mom would say "Samara, tell your Dad you need a new winter coat' and my Dad would say, "Samara, tell your Mom that money's tight and maybe next week we can work something out'..."

The key task for parents as your spousal relationship ends is to work toward building a cooperative parenting arrangement that:

- **protects your children from adult conflict**
- enables your children to have positive relationships with both parents
- provides your children with nurturing, security and stability.

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**Protecting Children from Parental Conflict**

Most children are resilient and highly adaptive. With care and nurturing, they will adapt to separation and new family arrangements. However, when children witness a lot of ongoing parental conflict such as their parents shouting or threatening each other, their emotional development can be damaged.

"... Eventually I just got very tired and fed up with being this messenger, and I said 'this has got to stop', and 'I think it's about time that both of you start talking together face to face or on the phone'." SAMARA, 13

*"...My Dad kept talking about my Mom, and how mean she was to him, and how she never calls and won't talk to him. It gets really tiring trying to look after my Sad Dad all the time. I told him "you should talk to your counsellor or adult friends about that..." My counsellor told me it was okay to say that to my parents if they talk about each other. It seemed to work, Dad doesn't tell me how mean Mom is, hardly ever." JACK 16*

*"....I really don't want to hear my Mom crying about my Dad anymore. It's been years now - I wish she'd go talk to someone. She just blames my Dad and won't go get help.... This sounds bad, but I'm starting to feel like she doesn't care about me- It's all about her....." ELAYNE 18*

*"....I still love my Dad, and my Mom is always trying to get me mad at him, I'm starting to not want to be around her anymore...." LINDY 16*

*"...My parents act like kids.... They want me to pick sides. Each one tries to win by being the looser. What's that about? Do they want me to feel sorry for them?....What good would that do. I don't get it." SARA 12*

Keeping adult conflicts away from children is one of the most important things you can do. In particular, using children as a way to punish the other parent is especially destructive for children of all ages. Parents who use children as a way to hurt the other parent use all sorts of damaging behaviours, such as blocking the other parent's access to the children, telling children about the other parent's shortcomings, or lying about the other parent's actions or intentions. Without exception, these tactics damage a child's health and well-being much more than the other parent.

### **Allowing Children to Have a Relationship with Both Parents**

Children tend to do best after separation and divorce when both parents remain involved in their lives. *If the children are past school age or living out on their own, each parent can and should maintain a rich personal relationship totally separate from the parent they cannot have a peaceful, respectful relationship with. This will be easier on the children, than an ongoing feud, even for grown children who just want to love each parent and get on with the business of their own lives.*

Mothers and fathers are important to children for emotional support, protection, guidance, gender identity and their basic trust and confidence in themselves and in the world. Each parent plays a valuable role in child rearing. The task for children after the separation is to develop a separate relationship with each parent, and to spend time with each of them.

It is not uncommon for a mother or father to have such strong negative feelings about the other parent that she or he feels it is in the best interests of the children to prevent the other person from seeing them. Although this may seem like a natural protective response, it will likely harm your children's emotional growth and development. Of course, sometimes continuing the parent-child relationship is not advisable, or another type of relationship may be necessary (for example, when there is child abuse, spousal abuse *addictions* or severe psychiatric illness). In those cases, a professional can help you make arrangements that are in the best interests of your children.

THERE ARE UNIQUE ISSUES facing women and children who are emerging from an abusive or violent situation. Safety planning needs to be a central focus, above and beyond the development of a cooperative parenting relationship. Assessing the dangerous nature of the relationship is more important than encouraging parents to put the past behind them.

### **Building a Cooperative Parenting Relationship: Providing Your Children with Nurturing, Security and Stability**

Working together as parents means sharing responsibility for your children's care and developing a way of making decisions that affect their health, education and welfare.

If you can't establish a civil relationship with the other parent, try to think of your relationship as having two parts. There is the marital part of the relationship which caused - and may still be causing - anger, grief and anguish. The other part is the parental relationship which will continue. It's in everyone's best interest to make it workable, but it's especially important for your children.

For a number of parents, it may be too difficult to talk directly with the other parent. This very understandable situation can be addressed by developing an "indirect parenting relationship." With this arrangement, parents communicate through letters, emails or another adult instead of talking with each other on the phone or in person. In addition, children can travel between homes with the assistance of another adult, or by being picked up by a parent at the child care centre or school.

The more you are able to achieve some kind of workable relationship, the better it will be for your children. Try to:

- respect each other's differences

- focus on the children, not on what the other parent may have done in the marriage or continues to do
- settle disagreements through give-and-take and compromise
- avoid making assumptions about the other parent's intentions or actions
- keep your agreements and promises (such as making child support payments on time, picking up and returning children on time).

The most important thing to keep in mind is that you are cooperating for your children's sake. Continue to **keep conflict away from your children's ears and eyes**. Over time, your relationship with the other parent may become easier and you may even develop a new understanding of each other. (Public Health Agency of Can.)

### When Parents Start Dating

In some families, a new adult relationship may have started before the separation, or may begin in the early stages of separation and divorce. In others, a new person may not enter the picture for months or years. Many single parents are trying to keep up with the extra demands of parenting on their own, and have little time or energy to spend on developing a new relationship. Some parents don't want to start going out with someone new - they may feel insecure about where to meet others and how to approach them, uncertain about their attractiveness, and concerned that they might fail in another relationship. For others, dating helps them adjust to divorce. It reaffirms their self-worth, reduces feelings of loneliness, and helps them get on with their lives.

Whatever the circumstances, dating may trigger emotions that are similar for both parents and children. They may be fearful of being hurt again, worry that they may not be loved by the new person, and have concerns about how the new person will fit into their lives. Parents can use this new situation as an opportunity to talk about how adults -just like children - need peer interaction with people their own age, and supportive relationships.

If the marriage ends after one parent leaves the relationship for another partner, children may feel particularly betrayed and angry. Children in these families will need plenty of opportunities to express their confusion and feelings - a difficult task for a parent who may be experiencing similar emotions.

Children have mixed emotions about their parents' new relationships. Depending upon their age, they may feel betrayal, jealousy, anger, confusion and even guilt. For example, they may feel:

- That the parent who is first to begin a new relationship is betraying the other parent. The parent can explain that people adjust differently, and that it is time for him or her to meet and go out with new people, even though the other parent may not be ready to begin another relationship.
- The parent-child relationship doesn't give parents the opportunity to do all the activities that adults like to do. It's important to keep on reminding children that friends and new partners do not replace the love between a parent and a child.
- Their parents may get back together again. No matter how often parents have told children that getting back together won't happen, many children continue to hope, even after a second marriage
- Embarrassed that parents have sexual feelings and a need for affection. This is especially true for children in their pre-teens and early teens. Parents should explain that they, like other human beings, have sexual feelings and that these are a natural part of adult life.
- They have been abandoned again and experience a renewed loss when parents spend time with another adult. Finding extra time for the child while seeing a new person is difficult, but important.
- Anger at being forced by adults to make another adjustment. How children act out this anger depends on their developmental stage. Clear and sensitive communication is the key to helping children cope with the adjustment.
- Anger that parents have their own rules for sexual behaviour and enforce what may seem like different rules for their children. Teenagers are especially likely to feel that while they have curfews or have to date people their parents know and approve of, their parents seem to follow a different standard. Explain that there are two sets of rules - one for adults and one for teenagers - and explain why this is so.
- Anger at the loss of privacy. Children need space they can call their own. It is important that new partners respect that space and treat children as individuals in their own right.

#### ▪ **Remarriage and Blended Families**

- Remarriage is one of the most common challenges facing children whose parents divorce. Children who have not adjusted to parental dating will have even more intense problems as they try to adjust to their newly blended family. Remarriage leaves no hope of the parents getting back together, although some children continue to fantasize about everybody living in one home again.
- Children may also have to deal with step-brothers and step-sisters, new grandparents, aunts and uncles. They may find it hard to accept changes in discipline and the authority of the step-

parent. They may be jealous of the time and attention given to the new partner, step-brothers and sisters. They may feel that they are treated unfairly compared to their new siblings. A new baby may also spark feelings of anger and insecurity. Parents may find that being aware of these issues can be useful as they help their children adjust to new situations.

- Step-family relationships or "blended families" differ from original family relationships in many ways. When families are reorganized, children often experience having more than one "mother" or "father." Most children adapt to this. Parents who have formed new relationships should make a special effort to spend time alone with their children. They need to know that they are part of the new life you are building.
- The step-parent enters a new family group that already has a shared history, strong bonds and an established way of operating. Acknowledge that you will never replace their mother or father, and work on developing a unique relationship with the children. Encourage your step-children to honour and respect both of their parents and not to take sides. A step-parent can be a special friend to the children. Try not to compete with, replace or be critical of the other parent. When step-parents criticize the children's parent, children feel worse about themselves and less loving toward the step-parent.
- In many cases, step-parent and step-children are suddenly thrown together, without the chance to develop a relationship gradually. The clashing of different rules, goals, definitions of behaviour and methods of child rearing can cause many problems, and a satisfying relationship between step-parents and children usually develops slowly. This is not surprising, since closeness, affection, friendship and trust usually need time to develop.
- Step-parents can help children deal with changing roles and circumstances by being patient and giving them lots of time to adapt to their personality and lifestyle.

*A Healthy way of viewing a new step parent relationship: Is "that there is one more person in the world to love the child."*