

CHILDREN AND DIVORCE

A Brief Guide for Parents on how to help their children with Divorce.

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Separation and divorce is likely to be difficult for everyone in your family. It can be stressful for each of you in different ways. You maybe worried about money, how you will manage and where you will live. One of you may not want the relationship to end and may feel depressed, angry or both of these feelings at once. Thinking about needs of your children when you are exhausted by the whole process may feel too much to manage.

Having someone you can talk to about your concerns, whether this is a friend or professional support in the form of a counsellor, can be really helpful. Someone who might be able to listen when you are feeling emotionally drained or help you consider what your main worries are can be immensely supportive. It may also enable you to feel stronger to support your children through the period of separation and divorce.

It is very common for children to feel guilty, powerless and confused about what is happening. You may also be experiencing similar emotions and hopefully this leaflet will give you some ideas as to how you can best help children during the next few weeks and months. It is important to remember that given the right conditions, children can adapt and recover from the stress surrounding separation and divorce.

WHAT SHALL WE TELL THE CHILDREN ABOUT WHAT IS HAPPENING

If possible, tell your children together, even the little ones, and before the decision to separate.

Offer clear and honest explanations that your children can understand.

This is best done at home and not just before bedtime. Weekends may offer the opportunity for you both to be around to answer their questions.

Be clear that this is the adults' decision and that they are not responsible. It doesn't mean that you will stop being parents. They need to know that you will both continue to be available for them as much as possible, try to undertake the same activities and show them you will always love them.

Your children may need to ask the same questions repeatedly and seek endless reassurance. Offer this as much as possible, but be realistic about the implications e.g. will daddy read me a story every night?

Allow your children to express their own emotions – sadness, rage, sarcasm, silence, lack of response, pleading, and denial. These are real emotions that they feel and they need the opportunity to express them. Whilst you can understand a child's unhappiness you may need to draw a line somewhere about what is acceptable and what isn't and why it isn't. For example, the child who always talks about their absent parent in abusive terms in the presence of younger siblings may need to be told how damaging this is.

HOW MUCH CONTACT SHOULD THEY HAVE WITH EACH OF US

As much as possible. It is very common for children to be concerned about both of you following a separation and they will want to know where you are and that you are okay.

The easiest way for them to do this is to see both of you as often as possible. They can then ask all the questions that may be important to them and seek reassurance that you both still want to be with them even if you are not together as a couple. This may not be practically easy for you or you may not want to offer contact to a partner who has left you, particularly if there is a third party. Your children need you to be positive about contact. It's all too easy to be negative about arrangements with separated partners. Try and see problems as things to overcome not as reasons to limit contact.

In between seeing you, phone calls and letters will help to reassure your children that the relationship with them is important and will continue. They may also want to ask you little questions which are important to them such as do you remember where you put a video. It is really helpful if they can ring you and ask you without feeling either of you will mind.

Think about the ages of your children and the level of timing of the arrangements for them to be with you. It is important that they are not prevented from seeing each of you nor forced into regular arrangements that feel uncomfortable for them. Listen to your children, allow them to have a voice in the arrangements. The whole idea of contact will seem unnatural to everyone. Try as much as possible to be flexible and minimise the artificiality.

It is really important for both of you to keep to arrangements that you make for your children to see you. If they are changed or do not take place, this may add to your childrens' sense of helplessness and abandonment

WHAT CAN WE DO TO HELP OUR CHILDREN

Try not to argue and fight in front of your children, particularly about issues concerning them. Children become very distressed by conflict and it is much better for them if they are able to see you both reach a compromise or resolution whenever possible. This also helps them to see that there are ways to resolve difficulties and they can use these methods as they grow up.

If possible support your children in keeping to the same routines, friendships, schools and activities. This will provide them with security and familiarity which is important at a time of uncertainty. If you as parents are able to hold to the same boundaries and discipline as you were before your separation, this will add to your childrens' sense of security and reinforcement of your role as parents. It is important that they are able to talk to each other so that you are able to discuss these issues. Either one or both of you may be feeling very embittered. However, your children still need and love you as parents.

Try to spend time with your children, listening and talking with them. You maybe feeling very tired and under pressure and it is often easy to find that although the children are with you, your thoughts are elsewhere or you are just too busy to talk to them. Most children enjoy the attention of a parent who is interested in them, wants to know what they have been doing, listens to their conversation, watches their play and enjoys spending time with them. However angry and bitter you may feel towards each other, try to separate out your parental role from your relationship as a couple.

If you can value each other as parents and encourage your children to talk about the other parent freely and without condemnation, this helps to retain your childrens' self-esteem and a sense of identification with each of you as parents.

If you can encourage your children to love and care for your ex-partner rather than asking them to side with one or other of you, this will reduce their worries about being asked to choose between you.

Similarly encourage them to enjoy themselves when they are with your ex-partner and talk about it on their return. This will mean they are less likely to be troubled by keeping secrets in the hope they are won't upset you. This may be very hard for you, particularly if you are dealing with the day-to-day problems and the sheer hard work of being a single parent.

Try to avoid using your children as messengers or asking them to find out information for you. This is an uncomfortable role for them. It will feel strange you may make them feel like a spy, even if you are keen to know about how your ex spends his or her time.

HOW MIGHT OUR CHILDREN REACT?

It is common for children to show their worries through their behaviour at time of stress. Younger children may start bed wetting or become clingy, while other children may become faddish about food or throw tantrums. Older children may regress in schoolwork, all at a time when you may be feeling drained and exhausted yourself.

Remember these are common occurrences and with support, time and understanding these behaviours are likely to disappear.

For some children, the separation may come as a relief. They may have witnessed the rows and the atmospheres and seen the separation coming for ages. Nevertheless, the final decision to separate can still be a tremendous shock to children and they often hope for some considerable time that their parents will get back together.

It is important to remember that a child's reaction to the separation, particularly when their behaviour gets worse or they become moody does not mean there are likely to be long term problems. Children who express their distress at the time are likely to diminish the chances of longer term harmful effects. The child who shows little emotion, be it anger or distress, runs the risk that in bottling up his or her feelings these may resurface at some later stage.

Your children may react in very different ways and there is not necessarily a right or a wrong way. Their reactions will be affected by a variety of factors including their age and understanding of what is happening and the strength of the relationship that they already have with you as parents. Don't expect that you can predict how children might react. They might surprise you. The shy quiet child might cope better than the confident outgoing one. There isn't really a normal way of reacting to a separation.