

# **HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH DIVORCE**

*Sometimes parents who feel emotionally overwhelmed at the time of separation or who fear hurting their children may think that their children would be better off not being told why mom and dad are separating. They may assume that children already know and fear upsetting them further. When children aren't told they:*

- \* may think it's their fault*
- \* have a distorted, superficial view of their parent's relationship*
- \* blame one parent*
- \* worry about being abandoned or unloved*

*The ideal explanation occurs with both parents present; before one parent physically leaves.*

*What should be included?*

*\* Acknowledgement that mom and dad have had problems getting along or aren't happy together anymore, in ways that allow each person to express their perspective in a respectful way.*

*\* Reassurance of how life will be (where the parent/child will live, how much time/when child will see each parent, space the child might have at each parent's home and what they can do to fix it up.)*

*\* Permission for children to respond in their own way; leaving door open for the same or additional questions over time. Answer children's questions as honestly and calmly as you can.*

*What should not be included?*

- \* Blaming and accusing the other parent*
- \* Discussing minute financial and emotional details that will worry and confuse the child*
- \* Reassuring a child of a parent's love when parent hasn't demonstrated that love*

*Younger children fear abandonment and they need reassurance of their continued relationship with each parent. Susie will go to the same nursery school each day; which parent will pick her up; how she will have her favorite toys, blanket and stuffed animal at each home and have consistent meals, nap & bedtimes.*

*Elementary children need reassurance of their loveability and that parents support youngster's*

*continuing on with their own life - - that parents will be alright. They may sometimes want to protect the parent they see as vulnerable and be angry at one or both parents since they are quite moralistic at this phase and may have difficulty seeing shades of grey. This is why it is so important to present a relationship as something between two people that one person cannot be totally responsible for. Children worry a lot about parents; particularly living conditions of the parent they spend less time with. Children may be clingy, very sad, may cry a lot or try to compensate by being a perfect child; they may exhibit frequent physical symptoms.*

*Middle schoolers are very self-conscious and have a need to be like everyone else. They may deny that the divorce affects them. They may refuse to talk, feel very angry, confused and avoid closure with parents (which they do at this time anyway). There is a great need to respect privacy and not embarrass the child. With their own sense of disorganization at this stage, children need as much structure as possible and clear consistent guidelines from both parents.*

*High school youth are able to understand more and as a result may experience angry feelings that parents didn't "practice what they preach". May at same time be able to separate more from the family situation; may worry about future - - college, money, parent's well being. It is important to remember that this is just as much a loss for this age group as it is for younger children. Youngsters are involved in making decisions and have many activities that are important to them. It is especially hurtful for parents to separate, for example, right at graduation time. This puts adolescents on the spot and detracts from their special time.*

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# **HELPING THE YOUNG CHILD ADJUST TO DIVORCE**

*within neighborhoods that have other children.*

**1. Explanations of the separation should be given but should remain fairly simple. The child should be reassured repeatedly that he or she is not the cause of the separation.**

**2. Visitation should be regular and consistent. Your child may benefit from marking visits (or shifts in households) on a calendar to help conceptualize the time involved. Parents should maintain daily phone contact if possible during the period not spent with his or her child.**

**3. If contact with one parent is irregular or does not occur the other parent should avoid making excuses. The parent who is involved with the child should reassure the child that the child is in no way responsible for the lack of contact.**

**4. Children of this age still need time with their parent. Try to set aside time each day to spend with your child to maintain an essential relationship during this stressful time. It's important to provide happiness and a sense of connectedness to your child. Help children express their feelings in numerous ways including; sharing your own feelings about the separation, letting the child know you are available if your child wants to talk, spending time alone with your child in unpressured situations (walks, reading at bedtime, play, stories, coloring, etc.).**

**5. Contact between the parent and teacher is especially important during the months following a separation. Parents should inform teachers and guidance counselors of the separation and of any other major changes affecting the child. Parents should monitor their child's progress in school. Disruptions in learning should be anticipated (it is sometimes helpful to communicate this to the child so that he does not feel badly about himself if he temporarily does poorly.) Ongoing school difficulties, however, should not be automatically blamed on the separation and should be assessed by the school system.**

**6. Parents should provide opportunities for their child to play with other children outside of school a couple of times a week. If possible, the households of each parent should be located**

**7. Major changes should be kept to a minimum during the months following the separation. Avoid changing neighborhoods and schools initially so as to minimize losses for your child.**

**8. Expect some signs of regression and somatic symptoms for the first few months. If the child is acting out his anger inappropriately (fighting at school, being abusive towards parent) parents should express understanding of the feelings but set limits regarding behavior. If a child is clingy, again parents should be supportive, but encourage the child to be independent and to not allow clinginess to interfere with normal activities. If a child is having difficulty sleeping at night, parents may choose to go to the child's room to comfort him rather than allow the child to sleep with the parent (this only encourages dependency and is a difficult habit to break.)**

**9. Parents should avoid making negative generalizations about the opposite sex and avoid making negative comparisons between the child and his same-sex parent. Parents should try to speak positively about both sexes.**

**10. There is at times a tendency for discipline to fall apart during the period following a separation due to parents feeling overwhelmed and/or due to feelings of guilt on the part of the parents. However it's important to maintain discipline during this period to help children feel a sense of control during what is otherwise a shaky and out of control time. Parents should continue to set clear expectations and follow through with appropriate consequences and rewards as much as they can.**

**11. (For non-shared custody situations) In the home of the non-live-in parent, the parent should establish an area (a corner is sufficient if a room is unavailable) which is the child's. Allow the child to participate in setting up this area and include toys and knickknacks that will remain. Also include the child in planning how time will be spent together.**

**Source: Family Information Services, 1992.**

# ***DIVORCE AND THE ADOLESCENT***

*Adolescence is a critical stage where youngsters establish a sense of belonging with peers and an identity separate from their family's. The critical tasks for this age group are:*

- \* experiencing success in relationships with their peers outside the family*
- \* a sense of belonging and feeling the same as others*
- \* a sense of self separate from family and friends, yet integrated with them and other groups and areas of their lives.*

*Adolescents deal with many changes - psychological, physiological, social, emotional and academic; each of which may differ in terms of rate of development and age at which change occurs. With a need to make many concurrent decisions, adolescents naturally may become more self-focused as they strive for an identity. While believing themselves to be invincible, adolescents become much more vulnerable as they cope with many more people outside their immediate families. They begin to view different dimensions of people - positive and negative characteristics that they begin to integrate and accept about themselves and those close to them.*

*Another task adolescents have at this time is to incorporate their sexuality into their identity. Role models of acceptance by each sex help youth to clarify their own identity, feel accepted by and develop healthy relationships with members of each sex. Adolescents are also establishing a sense of closeness or intimacy in their relationships with peers, while still maintaining a sense of self.*

*Strategies for helping teens cope with divorce:*

*1. Since youngsters are older and able to understand more, they may go back and ask questions that they have in the past about their parent's marriage. Answer them honestly without badmouthing other parent. Discuss the history of your marriage including positive, loving times to help them understand a longitudinal view of the marriage. Discuss relationships - -*

*both yours and youngster's to help child become more focused on healthy ways of relating and how you have changed as well as how your relationship has changed.*

- 2. Make time to totally focus on child in an unconditional loving manner. These kids are always saying their parents forget that they're kids because they are older, maybe taller, but still need hugs, praise and time with parents.*
- 3. Communicate with and catch your youngster when you can.*
- 4. Demonstrate that it's alright for your adolescent to go on with his life by seeking adult support for yourself such as counseling and other needed services when appropriate.*
- 5. Include adolescent in discussion of rules and consequences regarding; curfews, driving, school work, parties, drinking, drugs and other areas of a teen's life that require parental supervision. Be able to have to enforce rules and follow through with consequences.*
- 6. When opposite sex parents are not involved with youngsters, try to have friends and family members of the opposite sex model appropriate behavior.*
- 7. Permit adolescents to decide how close they want to be with each parent and each parent's adult friends. Expect courteous or respectful behavior and interactions but don't force closeness. Use discretion in dating and when to involve your adolescent.*
- 8. Take time to help your teen explore and make decisions about his or her future. Find out about school resources and how to use them, search for mentors from different sources.*
- 9. Get together with other families to reinforce your sense of family.*
- 10. Be flexible with adolescent in terms of time. Modify time with your child based on his or her requests. Don't force you child to have a relationship with other parent, but support that relationship if your youngster wants to be closer.*

# **DIVORCE AND THE OLDER ELEMENTARY-AGED CHILD**

## **Developmental Considerations:**

*\* The child's attitudes about himself are formed largely as a result of the messages he receives from significant others, particularly his parents.*

*\* Thinking tends to be concrete and egocentric at times leading child to assume responsibility for events beyond his control.*

*\* The child requires adult relationships to provide sex role models.*

*\* The child begins to measure himself by the extent to which he is like his peers.*

*\* The child begins to develop an identity separate and apart from siblings as an individual with unique interests, needs and personalities.*

*\* The child develops a sense of competence and self-reliance by being productive; in schoolwork, hobbies, extracurricular activities and by assuming small amounts of responsibility.*

## **Impact of Divorce:**

*\* The child representing a difficult period in the parent's life, reminding the parent of ex-spouse or posing an obstacle to pursuit of a new life, may receive negative messages from a parent and conclude: "I am bad." The child whose parent is impatient, inattentive or neglectful may conclude: "I am not loved . . . I am not lovable."*

*\* The child may believe that his parents separated in an effort to get away from him or because they disagreed about management of his behavior, leading to "self-downing" and guilt.*

*\* The child whose same sex parent is absent or minimally involved lacks a role model. The child whose parent is unable to function appropriately in the family, career or household, lacks a model of productivity.*

*\* Relationships with peers may be interrupted by a move to a new community and moves back and forth between parents' homes. Child lacks opportunity for peer validation of self worth.*

*\* The child may see himself as different from and inferior to peers because of changed family structure and a lowered standard of living.*

*\* Siblings may be treated as a "package" as a matter of convenience to the parent. Sibling rivalry may intensify.*

*\* Child's continuous involvement with activities in and outside the home may be limited by 1) parent's lack of time, energy or desire to share in child's interests, 2) parent's inability or unwillingness to provide transportation, 3) limited financial resources, 4) moves back and forth between parents' homes, or 5) parent's limited time, energy or patience necessary to help child take steps toward self-reliance.*

*\* Children's sense of competence, based on mastery and productivity may be impaired.*

*\* The parent may be less available to engage in frequent and meaningful dialogue with the child which aids in the development of complex reasoning and problem solving skills. The parent may also be less available to provide educational experiences outside the school setting.*

*\* The child, troubled by family related problems may turn energy and attention away from schoolwork. Concentration and organizational skills may be impaired, assignments may be neglected and increased incidence of physical symptoms may lead to frequent trips to the health room or to increased absence from school.*

*\* The child may experience loyalty conflicts, believing that he must be fair to each parent or run the risk of hurting one or both parents or incurring their disapproval and rejection.*

*\* The child who perceives his parent as sad, depressed or otherwise impaired experiences sadness and concern for the parent. The child may attempt to parent his parent. The child may be reluctant to relinquish this role because of the security it appears to provide.*

*\* Parental inattentiveness or absence, loss of day to day contact with one or both parents, separation from siblings, and loss of pets lead to sadness, loneliness and possible depression. The child may worry about a complete loss of contact with a parent. The child may cling to the parent and resist separation.*

*\* The parent who withdrew from the family during the marriage and relegated all parenting responsibilities to the other parent, may begin to establish a more meaningful relationship with the child following separation.*

**Source: Family Information Services, 1992.**

**Strategies for helping elementary-aged child:**

**1. Attempt to view your child as an individual with unique strengths and weaknesses, rather than as a reflection of the child's other parent. Focus on problem behaviors without condemning the child or other parent. (e.g. say: "I am disappointed that you were dishonest with me" rather than "you are a liar like your father.")**

**2. Communicate to the child that he is an object of love and affection. Communicate verbally through assurance of love and non-verbally by holding & hugging. Set aside time, ideally each day, to spend with the child on a one to one basis, exclusive of new spouse, romantic friends or the child's siblings. Read a story, take a walk, play a game, do a craft project, etc. This will reassure your child of his important place in your life.**

**3. If you or your child's other parent behave in ways which are hurtful to the child, acknowledge the inappropriateness of the behavior to validate the child's perceptions and feelings and prevent the child from blaming himself. For example, you may say: "I am sorry that your dad didn't come to see you this weekend. It was not responsible of him to call at the last minute. I can understand how disappointed and frustrated you must feel"; or "If I am irritable, it's not your fault - - I love you very much - - I'm just having a hard time."**

**4. Provide the child with a calendar so that he can visualize his schedule with each parent. Stick to the schedule as much as possible. Discuss changes with your child.**

**5. Maintain contact between visits by phoning, writing or exchanging audio tapes. Tell the child when you will be out of town and how he may reach you if necessary.**

**6. Develop strategies with your child for easing the transition from the home of one parent to the other. Allow your child time alone if he desires this or spend some quiet, unstructured time with your child upon his return. Encourage your child to talk about the pain evoked by repeated separations, difficulties experienced during time with the other parent or other matters of concern.**

**7. Avoid placing your child in situations which trigger loyalty conflicts or anxiety about the loss of one or both parent's love. Avoid criticizing**

**the child's other parent in the child's presence and seeking the child's endorsement or suggestion that he should take sides. Avoid asking the child to divulge confidential information about his other parent or to deliver messages that he is not comfortable with (e.g. "tell your mother that SHE needs to buy you new shoes . . . that's what I give her money for").**

**8. Provide repeated, simple explanations of the reasons for the separation or divorce, reassuring the child that he was not to blame. Read children's books about divorce, draw pictures or write stories to enhance your communication. If there are certain aspects of the marital relationship which were particularly dysfunctional, explain this to the child in simple terms so that he can begin to build an understanding of the dynamics of relationships and distinguish between healthy and unhealthy behaviors. For example, you may say: "Your mom worked very long hours and was away on business a great deal. We stopped talking to each other. I felt very lonely."**

**9. Support the child's involvement in meaningful activities and peer relationships. Adjust visitation schedules to accommodate child's social and extracurricular needs. Attend child's school and athletic events or performances. Help child to inform other parent of events and accept presence of child's other parent (you need not be friendly, but be civil). Host child's friends for visits or parties, provide child with transportation to his friends' homes or to activities, or allow your child to have a friend accompany him on outings or for visitation.**

**10. Provide opportunities for your child to associate with other children and families experiencing separation and divorce through groups for children, community organizations, friendships or school counseling groups.**

**11. Allow siblings to have a balance of time together and apart. Avoid treating siblings as a unit all of the time. Foster individual interests and relationships for each. Allow each child to have individual belongings and personal space. If finding one to one time with your child is a problem develop a plan with your child and ex-spouse to allow each child periodic time alone with each parent.**

**12. If your child lacks a meaningful relationship**

*with one parent, provide substitute role models (scout leaders, coaches, relatives, friends.)*

**13. If your child has problems in his relationship with his other parent and the child's safety and well being are not endangered, help the child to explore his thoughts and feelings and practice how he will approach his parents. Avoid speaking for the child.**

**14. Provide for childcare in your absence to ensure child's safety.**

**15. If child is fearful at night, help him develop coping strategies (reading, listening to music, holding a pet, playing a quiet game). Sit with and read or talk to the child at bedtime and comfort briefly during the night. Avoid sharing a bed with your child.**

**16. Avoid dwelling on financial concerns with the child or within the child's earshot. Communicate the message: "we have resources . . . we will make it . . . this is a grown up problem and not something for you to be concerned about."**

**17. If you are having difficulties with extreme sadness, depression or other aspects of your adjustment, acknowledge this to your child. However, avoid dwelling upon details with your child or within your child's earshot. Indicate that you have resources (friends, family, mental health professions) and that your child need not feel responsible for your well-being. Reassure your child that you are still capable of providing for his safety and well-being.**

**18. To foster the development of reasoning skills engage in frequent dialogue with your child. Discuss current events or events in your child's day, play a board game, read and discuss the story together, watch and discuss a movie. Utilize situations in your child's life to teach problem solving.**

**19. Advise the school of changes in your child's life. Communicate with teachers, counselors, and administrators to monitor your child's academic and behavioral progress in school. Formulate a plan to support your child and reevaluate several times a year.**

**20. Provide a specific time and place for your child to complete schoolwork. Be available or**

**arrange for a competent adult to provide supervision and assistance with schoolwork. Communicate with your child's other parent to ensure continuity in the organization and completion of schoolwork.**

**21. Provide educational experiences outside the school setting (take trips to museums, read together, attend cultural events).**

**22. Teach your child beginning steps in self-reliance (simple cooking projects, selecting own clothes, helping to decorate a new room, caring for a pet). Avoid burdening your child with excessive responsibilities which interfere with the child's ability to pursue age appropriate activities and relationships.**

**23. Foster the child's development of self-control by creating a stable and predictable environment. Establish rituals and traditions, such as regular family meal times. Select a few important target behaviors (control of physical aggression, clearing the table, making bed) and make expectations, rewards and consequences clear. Carry out rewards and consequences consistently but do not be punitive or harsh in response to the child's failures. Your child may temporarily regress (slip back to earlier behaviors) in response to the family change, or if discipline has been inconsistent or lax the child will need time to comply with your new expectations.**

**24. Model self-control for your child. Avoid the use of physical punishment and avoid shouting matches. Do not respond to the child's threats with counter-threats (when your child says "I'll show you, I'm going to live with daddy" avoid responding with "I'll pack your bags".)**

**25. Attempt to provide consistency between households. When this is not possible, discuss inconsistencies with the child without condemning the other parent. Avoid allowing your child to manipulate you or his other parent as a result of differences in values and expectations.**

*Source: Family Information Services, 1992.*

# **COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR TEENAGER**

**1. Catch them when you can! Teens are filled with energy and activities and are usually on the run. A five-minute discussion can be more meaningful than a half-hour talk, which your teen may label a lecture.**

**2. Stop and talk, if possible, when your teen wants to share. Kids usually give "clues" when they need your attention. Stopping to sit, listen, look at them and respond is a message to them that you care. It makes the next time you talk easier.**

**3. Understand their development. While you're experiencing a difficult time, they may be, too. They are making decisions about their futures, are half "out the door" physically and emotionally and struggling to achieve a sense of independence. Kids need support and encouragement at this time. We often hear, "Just because I'm tall doesn't mean I don't need a hug once in a while." Let your teen learn what he or she is doing right. When you feel overwhelmed and can't help with a particular task, teach your teen how to utilize outside resources, such as guidance counselors.**

**4. Use "I feel" statements to convey your feelings and give your child the opportunity to respond in a similar manner. Kids at this stage intellectually exercise their abstract reasoning and may question you a lot. To avoid defensive behavior, contain your communication to the item you're discussing. Don't bring up past events. Express your feelings in terms of "I feel" (rather than "you did or said"); respond specifically to the situation you are discussing and when you are finished speaking, give your child an opportunity to respond.**

**5. Expect changes in relationships. Often before leaving home, adolescents miss a relationship with a parent they may not have been close to. Teens often request to live**

**with that parent to try to achieve a greater degree of closeness. This is not a rejection of the live-in parent, but rather a need for assurance, love and acceptance of both parents when possible. Be honest with your child in sharing the feelings and concerns you might have in permitting your child to live with or see the other parent more often.**

**6. Be honest with your feelings about the divorce and try to share them with your teen. That will convey a message that it's okay for them to share their feelings. A helpful reminder: you may feel differently about the divorce. You may have gone on with your life and may want to share your dating experience. Your teen may still be grieving about the divorce or be resentful of your dating if he or she is not.**

**7. Time-outs can do wonders. This can be a volatile stage for teens and with a major family change, all tempers may be short. During a calm time, discuss strategies for avoiding shouting matches such as: whenever a person feels like he is losing control, he can signal the other person and talking can cease until both parties are ready to resume.**

**8. Acknowledge all the positive things you can about your teen as well as the pressure he or she has. Just as you have difficult days at work, so do kids in school and on the job. You model caring. It will be returned to you if your teen can first experience your caring.**

**Distributed by:**

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