

## **Children and Family Break-up**

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Although separation and divorce can be the most painful events a family may ever experience, they may come as a welcome relief after a period of tension and conflict in a troubled marriage. However, the period of adjustment is a painful one too. As a parent, you must deal not only with your own confusion and pain but also the confusion and pain of your children. You will also worry about what the break-up will mean for their futures, how they will cope, and if they will still love you.

### **Points to remember**

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.

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.

### **What you can say**

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.

- **The separation is not their fault.** Children of all ages often blame themselves for their parents' separation. They feel that perhaps they caused the break-up of the family because they were "not good enough." You must let them know that this is strictly an adult problem. Assure them that they had nothing to do with the separation and that they could not prevent it from happening. They will need to hear this from you many times and in many forms before their sense of guilt will go away.
- **You will always be their parents.** Your children need to know that they are not losing the love and care of either parent. They need to know that neither of you is divorcing your children. Reassure them that, although you and your spouse are no longer together, they will always belong to both of you.
- **You will continue to look after them.** Talk openly about your children's new living arrangements. If you are the one living apart, make sure they understand that you will still spend time with them, that they will still be part of your life, and that you will still be a part of

theirs.

### **What you can do**

It will be important to do certain specific and practical things to help your children adjust to the break-up of the family. These are things you can do, both as the custodial parent (the parent living with the children) and the non-custodial parent (the parent living apart).

- **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 his/ her authority. 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.
- **Share needed information with your children.** Talk openly about custody arrangements, visiting times and other schedules. Respect your children's right to know about decisions made on their behalf. To some extent, what your children need to know will be based on their ages. For example, a pre-teen child will not benefit from hearing about mortgage rates, RRSPs or fine points of family law, but a teenager might ask you questions about these things. The key is to avoid putting an extra burden on your children by sharing all your personal and financial worries with them.
- **Keep your children's routines in place.** Do your best to maintain their regular schedules, especially in the time immediately after the separation, For example, both parents can work together to see that their children still get to their Saturday morning hockey practice or ballet lesson. Within these routines, allow them to make as many choices as reasonably possible. Young children can be allowed to choose which clothes to wear for the day and which toys to play with at a given time. Older children can be given the freedom to choose which sports to play and to set their own times for visiting the non-custodial parent.
- **Keep your promises, be reliable.** Your children will need to know they can rely on you. If you have promised to take them on a picnic next Saturday, make sure you do not let other things get in the way. A promise to "pick you up from football practice Wednesday night" should be treated very seriously.
- **Let your children grieve the loss.** Recognize that your children will experience all the emotions that you have, and they will talk to their friends as you will have talked to yours. Allow time for them to talk to you about how they feel, and listen without interrupting. Be honest about your feelings when you are asked. Your honesty will give them permission to be honest about their own emotions.

### **If your children need professional help**

Most children are able to cope with the separation and divorce of their parents and make good adjustments to their new family structure. However, if you are concerned that your children are having difficulty adjusting, do not hesitate to get professional help for them. There are many excellent child psychiatrists, therapists and doctors specifically trained to assess and treat children.

Many community agencies provide support groups and information for families going through separation and divorce. Your children deserve all the support they can get during this difficult time of

adjustment.

**Do you need more help?**

There are many books which can give you additional information and ideas on supporting your children through a separation and divorce. You can also contact a local community organization, such as the Canadian Mental Health Association, to find out about workshops, courses, self-help groups for single parents, and professional counselling services.