

Putting Children First After Separation and Divorce

It is estimated that in Canada about a hundred thousand children a year experience the effects of parental separation. About 25% of divorces remain highly conflicted and 10% litigate or are the “divorces from hell”. Court hearings for “contested” separations take huge sums of money and also tend to be ones where the disruption to children is greatest. The homes they live in may be sold; they may have to change schools and say goodbye to friends; their lives are basically turned upside down. The research on the impact of divorce on children clearly shows that it is the ongoing adult conflict which leads children from divorced parents to suffer the most.

In the period right after the physical separation of parents living arrangements, heightened parental conflict is common. When parents experience such a change, emotions of hurt, fear and anger often follow. These can be expressed by blaming the other. When the conflict is not well managed, it can lead to a child's worst fear. They may think, if my parents can stop loving each other, maybe they can stop loving me. A child will feel divided loyalty to each parent and if conflict becomes intolerable, one parent may relinquish involvement.

Well-resolved conflict is not the only factor which determines a child's successful adjustment after divorce. The well-being of the parent(s) with whom the child lives, the quality of relationships the child has with both parents, stresses over reduced financial resources, and less time with each parent all can take their toll on children. However, focus on effectively resolving parental conflict is the most important variable in helping children adjust. Conflict is something over which parents have control.

How to Help Children Adjust

In their book *Putting Children First*, Canadian authors Hanna McDonnough and Christina Bartha provide the following suggestions for parents to reduce the negative impact on children when talking to them.

Be Emotionally Centred

Stay composed when talking about the separation or the other parent. Your emotions, will affect your child. Do not talk to your child right after a fight with your ex.

Avoid “Dumping” on the Other Parent

Children should not be expected to absorb your emotions and especially your feelings about your ex. It may get you sympathy temporarily but will cause resentments and increase a conflict of loyalties to each parent.

Provide Information

Speak about the facts at a level appropriate to your child's understanding. This type of wording is very clear to most children: “Your mother/father and I do not love each other any more. We are going to try to remain friends. We will always love you. We will not be living together. You will be living with your father/mother alternate weeks.” Children who can make sense of their changing world will develop greater confidence.

Check to find out if Child Understands

Because emotions can distort the telling and the hearing of the information, check out what your child understands from what you just said.

Ask How Your Child Feels About the Information Given

When you are sure that the child understands the information, invite them to say how they feel.

Expect Your Child's View to be Different from Yours

You may be surprised by your child's viewpoint. Supporting a different point of view helps your child with independent thinking.

Feelings and Reactions Keep Changing

If you feel that the last conversation did not go so well, no need to worry, there will always be a next time. Your child's changing reactions are normal as they process information, reflect and understand. One day they may be upset with a parent the next longing to see him/her. Keep the lines of communication open.

Be Ready to Comfort your Child.

Children often fear loss of love. They sometimes blame themselves for the split. They worry about where they will live and who will care for them. Make sure the children know their parents' love for them will never change. A child of any age needs reassurance and comfort.

Try not to Judge your Child's Feelings

It helps a child feel safe to express his feelings when he is not judged.

Do not Overprotect your Child

The separation is part of the reality of their life and cannot be avoided. Children who learn to face up to fears and pain develop greater competence and confidence. Keep your own guilt about the separation from over protecting them.

Do not “Parentify” your Child

Sometimes a child will take on the new “man/woman of the house” role to help the single parent. Children need to be free, unburdened from premature adult responsibilities.

Prevent your Child from Developing a “False Self”

Children who hear negative views about the ex from each parent will behave in one role in front of the mother and another in front of the father. They will not be themselves and will instead learn to distance themselves from their true feelings. Creating a ‘false self’ is harmful for a child and causes long lasting-problems.