

HELPING PARENTS TO HELP CHILDREN

Each year an estimated 240,000 children in the India experience the separation of their parents. Overall, more than one in ten children will see their parents split up before they reach their 16th birthday.

Resolution lawyers abide by a code of practice which encourages solutions based on the needs of the whole family and particularly the best interests of children.

As lawyers, it is our job is to help you through the legal process as best we can. However, we realize that many of our clients will be unsure as to how to best manage their separation in the best interests of their children. Many have crucial needs that may not be about legal issues. You may feel you don't have the information you need to support your children when making incredibly important decisions about their future during your separation.

You will need to find ways to address key issues such as understanding how to talk to children, supporting children's feelings while managing your own, minimizing conflict between households or developing workable parenting arrangements. We believe that having access early on in the process to good information and resources is a key factor in how well you and your children will be able to manage this transition.

This article is designed to give you key information at the earliest possible stage and to guide you in making a positive difference for your children. It supports a child-centered approach which research and experience suggests will help children to move from being a family under one roof to being a family in two separate homes.

The enclosed material covers a range of topics about the separation process as well as information about how children are affected and can be helped. We know that everything included may not be a

part of your experience but we hope that you will find pieces that are personally helpful and useful.

Given that you will always be the only Mother and Father your children ever have, the choices you make at this time will mean everything to your children. We hope that this guide will offer you a means to move forward in the best possible way.

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CHAPTER 1
WHAT SHOULD I EXPECT?

THE EMOTIONAL ASPECTS OF SEPARATION AND
DIVORCE FOR PARENTS AND CHILDREN.

As life changes for you and your children it is normal to experience a significant sense of grief over that loss. Divorce ranks second only to death regarding the level of stress it generates in a person's life. Even though the whole family goes through transition at the same time, it is likely that your children's feelings about divorce will be different from your own. Therefore it is vital that you as a parent are able to keep your feelings about splitting up separate from your children's feelings.

Not only will your children's experience be different but you and your partner will probably have different feelings too. When a relationship breaks down, often one partner has begun to emotionally distance themselves before initiating the separation. This situation usually leaves one parent further along the emotional process than the other at the beginning. Regardless of which position you are in, understanding the process and how you, your children and the other parent are managing their emotions can be helpful as you move forward.

DURING THIS TIME YOU CAN HELP YOURSELF AND YOUR CHILDREN THROUGH THIS PROCESS BY:

- Taking care of yourself. Eat, sleep and exercise on a regular basis.
- Trying to stay mindful of your feelings about the situation.
- Accessing support so you can manage your feelings in a responsible manner.
- Making planned changes rather than reactive ones.
- Placing the needs of your children at the forefront of your decision making process.

When divorce or separation occurs children will experience a wide range of emotions. Sometimes it can be difficult to know which changes in behavior are normal and which are related to their parents splitting up. Although children may talk to you about their feelings, it is also helpful to pay attention to their actions and behavior. The following information has been designed to help you recognize various ways you and your children might experience this transition.

DENIAL

The idea that life is changing can often be overwhelming for children. Because of this, they may be reluctant to acknowledge the divorce or separation as real. Parents usually go through a similar process by distancing themselves from or denying the reality of the situation. For some parents, this stage can also manifest itself as shock or disbelief.

DURING THIS STAGE YOU MIGHT:

- Feel like “This can’t be happening to me”.
- Choose not to participate in the process.
- Actively sabotage your partner’s attempts to file for divorce or leave the family home.
- Postpone telling family or friends that things are changing.
- Continue life as if nothing has changed.
- Tell yourself this is just a phase.

- Engage in distractions to avoid dealing with the reality of the separation by working extra hours or keeping yourself busy.
- Minimise the impact by telling yourself things are fine.
- Try to emotionally distance yourself from your feelings by engaging in self-destructive behaviors such as using alcohol, food, gambling or overspending.
- Delay telling children or make up excuses for a parent's absence or change of residence.

WHEN CHILDREN ARE HAVING DIFFICULTY ACCEPTING THE REALITY OF DIVORCE OR SEPARATION THEY MAY:

- Change the subject when you talk about it.
- Choose not to tell others such as friends, teachers, and other family members
- Make up excuses for the change in the family.
- Talk about the family as if nothing has changed.
- Try to plan events that involve both parents being together.
- Resist spending time in the other home with their other parent because it makes the situation more real for them.

HOW CAN YOU HELP YOURSELF AND YOUR CHILDREN?

In the early stages, try to keep life predictable and consistent for you and your children. Try to avoid making significant changes and maintain regular routines/normal activities as much as possible. Make sure you and the children are getting plenty of rest, eating regularly, exercising and have access to supportive people.

ANGER

Anger is a normal and understandable reaction to divorce and separation for both parents and children. You may not feel well equipped to deal with this emotion - but how you manage the anger for yourself and with your children is critical. Key factors in successfully dealing with this stage involve recognising the feeling and then finding some healthy, appropriate ways to deal with it.

WHEN PARENTS BECOME ANGRY THEY MAY:

- Feel more irritable and short tempered
- Make irrational parenting decisions
- Become overly reactive
- Feel extremely tense and stressed
- Engage in making personal attacks or look for ways to get even with their ex-spouse
- Become less emotionally available for their children
- Be unsupportive of the children's relationship with their other parent
- Openly criticise or say bad things about the other parent in front of the children.

WHEN CHILDREN ARE ANGRY THEY MAY:

- Behave badly, test limits or break rules
- Tell a parent "I hate you" or become disrespectful
- Blame one or both parents for the situation
- Throw temper tantrums or display other destructive behaviours like biting, hitting, fighting and kicking. This can be especially true for younger children
- Have frequent emotional outbursts
- Withdraw from family or emotionally shut down
- Engage in risky or dangerous behaviours (Teens and pre-adolescents)

WHAT CAN YOU DO FOR YOURSELF?

If you find yourself reacting inappropriately to something, find a way to distance yourself from your immediate response. Give yourself time to vent your feelings to a friend, sort through your feelings and cool off. Once you have sorted through things then approach the situation. If the issue involves the other parent, instead of waging a personal attack stay focused on the issue at hand. At all costs do what you can to appropriately manage your anger so that your children do not end up paying the price.

Other ways to manage your anger might involve exercising, writing, deep breathing, talking to a friend or finding professional, spiritual or religious support. Most importantly, find healthy ways that work for you.

It is also advisable to use some discretion when getting feedback or advice from others. Anger can often leave us feeling very vulnerable. While family, friends or co-workers may have good intentions, remember that their perspective might be biased or based on their own experiences. There will be times when the advice you receive from others is not right for you or your children. Therefore choose your support people wisely. Seek out those who are able to listen and support you in a helpful way, rather than those who want to help you fuel the fire.

HOW CAN YOU HELP YOUR CHILDREN?

When children are feeling angry it is important to provide them with love and understanding as well as discipline. If you are having problems with how your children are handling their anger, try the following:

- Schedule a time to talk to your child about the situation.
- Let them know you understand this is a difficult time for them and give them a chance to share how they feel.
- Tell them while it is okay to feel angry, how they are handling their feelings is not.
- Clearly identify which behaviours are not acceptable (for example, hitting, being disrespectful and breaking things).
- Write down with your child at least three to five healthy, appropriate ways they can express their anger. Good examples are exercising, hitting or screaming into a pillow, keeping a journal or diary, drawing to describe feelings, stepping away from the situation, counting until you cool off, taking a walk, talking to someone you trust
- Let your child know what will happen if they choose an inappropriate way of handling their anger. Make sure the consequence is both appropriate for their age and enforceable.

For example, with a younger child you might say: “When you speak disrespectfully, you will have a time out and go to bed early.” For a teenager, you might consider withdrawing a privilege such as taking away a mobile phone or not being able to watch television or play video games.

SECOND THOUGHTS

For parents, there is usually a time when you may consider reconciling or giving the relationship a second chance. Children, however, may function under the belief that they have the ability to bring Mother and Father back together.

DURING THIS STAGE YOU OR YOUR PARTNER MIGHT:

- Consider relationship counseling
- Try to reconcile or give the relationship a second chance
- Waiver in your decision making regarding the divorce or separation
- Move back into the family home
- Talk with children about changing a parent’s mind.

WHEN CHILDREN ARE TRYING TO SAVE THE FAMILY THEY MIGHT:

- Promise to be good or behave better
- Develop physical symptoms (for example, stomach or head ache) or an emergency situation so that parents have to care for them together
- Create events or reasons for parents to have contact
- Try to become “perfect” children so parents don’t have anything to fight about
- Become a discipline problem at school or home so that parents have a common cause. In other words, they are trying to get their parents to focus on them rather than each other
- Feel responsible or blame themselves for the situation between Mother and Father

WHAT CAN YOU DO FOR YOURSELF?

Realise that making the decision to separate or divorce is a very difficult and personal choice. Give yourself time to think through decisions before acting on them. Most parents, at one time or another, feel some guilt and wonder if they should reconsider. If possible, seek out someone (for example, a counsellor, friend, co-worker, family member) you can talk to who can help you weigh up your options.

HOW CAN YOU HELP YOUR CHILDREN?

When parents split up, children often mistakenly believe that they are responsible. Their sense of guilt usually increases when they are exposed to parental arguments and conflict. From a child's perspective if Mother and Father are having a row about them, they will naturally feel that they are to blame. So minimise conflict whenever possible and let children know that the divorce or separation is not their fault. Understand that your children may need to hear this more than once as they are likely not to believe you the first time you say it. It is equally important for children to know that they cannot fix or change what has happened in the family.

DEPRESSION

When going through the process of separation and divorce it is quite normal to feel depressed or intensely sad. For most parents and children, these feelings will diminish over time. However, if you find that the sadness is persistent or becomes worse for either you or your children, you should seek professional help.

Generally professional intervention is recommended if multiple symptoms are experienced for most of the day, nearly every day for a period of several weeks.

SIGNS OF DEPRESSION IN PARENTS:

- Changes in appetite that leads to either considerable weight gain or weight loss without dieting
- Extreme changes in sleeping habits, either an inability to sleep, periods of insomnia or sleeping too much

- Persistent feelings of sadness
- Lack of motivation
- Inability to maintain normal activities such as cleaning the house, managing financial matters or caring for yourself
- Feeling excessively tired or fatigued
- Unable to concentrate or focus
- Frequently becoming easily upset, tearful or crying
- Development of physical symptoms, such as recurring headaches, stomach aches or muscular aches
- Being irritable and short tempered
- Unable to find pleasure in activities you used to enjoy
- In more serious cases, frequent thoughts of death or self harm.

SIGNS OF DEPRESSION IN CHILDREN:

- Change in academic performance at school
- Withdrawing from family and friends
- Inability to concentrate
- Being agitated or irritable
- Not getting pleasure from activities they used to enjoy
- Persistently sad throughout the day
- Trouble sleeping at night
- Feeling tired or lacking energy
- Easily upset and tearful
- Saying things like “I wish I was never born” or “Maybe life would be better without me around”.

HOW CAN YOU HELP YOURSELF?

Again, if you are having ongoing feelings of sadness that are affecting your daily life, seek out professional help. While at times it may feel overwhelmingly difficult, try to identify major causes of stress and seek help managing day-to-day activities. You may also find that taking some kind of positive action every day, no matter how small, will help you find the energy you need to get through the day.

HOW CAN YOU HELP YOUR CHILDREN?

While it is terribly hard to see your child upset or hurt, it is important for them to have an opportunity to feel the sadness. Try to avoid discounting, changing or covering up their feelings by saying things like “It’s not so bad” or “It will all be okay.” Some parents make the mistake of trying to indulge their children with things or activities as a way of taking their mind off the sadness. Usually this is only a temporary cure. Instead, let your children know they have a right to feel sad about what has happened in the family. As with anger, it is important for you to help your child find some healthy and acceptable ways to deal with the sadness.

EXAMPLES OF WAYS TO EXPRESS SADNESS:

- Keep a diary or write about feelings
- Draw a picture of how you feel
- Talk to a trusted adult
- Have a good cry
- Talk about a time when things felt better and how you might be able to make changes in the future
- Find a book or story about divorce to read and talk about it.

ACCEPTANCE

While divorce and separation is a different experience for each family, most find that, after some time has passed, life eventually begins to feel more ‘normal’. When this happens, you may discover that life no longer feels like an emotional rollercoaster and that transitions between the two homes have become easier.

WHEN FAMILIES MOVE CLOSER TO ACCEPTING THE DIVORCE, THEY WILL:

- Have a renewed sense of interest in life
- Be able to disengage from strong emotions
- Feel more emotionally balanced
- Re-establish hope for the future
- Be able to acknowledge both the positive and negative aspects of divorce

- Make transitions between homes without as much disruption
- Re-engage in activities or develop new interests.

CHAPTER 2

HOW CHILDREN MAY REACT TO DIVORCE AND SEPARATION AT DIFFERENT AGES.

One significant factor in how children will adjust to divorce and separation is their age and developmental stage. The information below offers some guidelines regarding expected milestones and how divorce may affect children in various age groups.

INFANTS

The primary developmental task for infants is to bond with Mother and Father and gain a sense of security in the world around them. This occurs through regular consistent contact (for example, parents meeting their child's needs through daily activities such as changing, feeding, holding, interacting). When parents live apart, meeting this developmental need becomes more challenging. Parents will need to be more creative in how they share parenting time as for infants long periods of time away from either parent is not recommended.

THINGS TO LOOK FOR

- Problems sleeping
- Not eating well or loss of appetite
- Digestive problems
- Excessive crying or irritability

NEEDS

- Regular and consistent contact with both parents
- Routines and schedules maintained
- Planned transitions
- Minimized exposure to parental tension
- Develop trust in their environment

TODDLERS

As children move into toddlerhood they begin to view themselves as separate from their parents. While exploring their new-found independence, these young children will also experience a wide range of emotions but lack the ability to understand or manage their feelings. Be aware that your toddler will primarily express their feelings with actions, especially when they are angry, frustrated or upset. This is a time when children need you not only to love them, but to also set appropriate limits and provide discipline when they behave inappropriately.

THINGS TO LOOK FOR

- May engage in temper tantrums, biting, hitting, or crying when feeling anxious/stressed
- Difficulty leaving one parent or making transitions
- Becomes overly clingy or anxious
- Nightmares or sleep problems due to anxiety

NEEDS

- Appropriate limits and discipline when behaving badly
- Predictable environment (i.e. regular bedtime and daily routines)
- Child-safe homes with both parents that allow for exploration and stimulation
- Regular contact with Mother and Father
- Reassurance of love through physical affection and direct interaction

THREE TO FIVE YEARS OLD

During their pre-school years, children begin to develop ideas about who they are. The most important influences regarding that identity are Mother and Father. Additionally, relationships with parents also form the basis for future social skills and gender identity. Young children will often choose individual characteristics of parents as a way to define who they are. This is one reason why it is important to maintain a positive attitude about your ex in front of the children. Also, pre-school children have a very narrow

perception of the world and literally feel that everything happening around them is in some way related to what they have thought, felt, said or done. As a result, they often struggle with feeling responsible for what has happened between Mother and Father.

THINGS TO LOOK FOR

- Regressed behavior (i.e. toilet trained yet wetting again)
- Showing anger through temper tantrums or physical aggression
- Missing the parent they are not with at bedtime or meal time
- Blaming themselves or feeling guilty

NEEDS

- Routines and predictability
- To be prepared for transitions
- Can tolerate longer period of time between homes, but contact needs to be consistent
- To be reassured that divorce is not their fault
- Ability to love and feel positive about both parents
- Acceptable ways to express feelings and limits when behaving badly

SIX TO NINE YEARS OLD

Now that children have begun to establish a sense of who they are, their focus turns to building self-esteem. The development of special skills or talents can become one way that children start feeling good about themselves.

Remember that your child's relationship with the other parent is still a key factor in how they view themselves. Make sure that you speak positively about the other parent and that you allow your child to feel good about that relationship. Develop mentally, school age children view divorce differently to younger children and are more likely to feel a greater sense of sadness. While they are better able to identify and talk about their feelings, they may be reluctant to do so because they are worried about making things worse or upsetting a parent.

THINGS TO LOOK FOR

- Greater sense of sadness over the divorce
- Fantasies of reuniting or saving the family
- May personalize the divorce and feel they are to blame
- Worried about being replaced or rejected by a parent

NEEDS

- Opportunity to talk about feelings
- Reassurance that they are special to Mother and Father
- Need to know divorce is a grown-up problem they cannot fix or change
- Can tolerate longer periods of time in each home but will need contact from the parent they are not with (for example, phone calls, emails, dinner during the week)

10 TO 12 YEARS OLD

In the pre-teen years children literally view the world in all or nothing, right or wrong terms. They do not have the emotional maturity or skill to understand that both parents may have some responsibility for the marriage or partnership not being successful. For this reason, they may openly condemn one parent for their actions - particularly if they view that parent as responsible for the divorce or separation. Even though it can be tempting, it is best if parents do not place children in the position of judge and jury. Instead, support your children in seeing more than one perspective. Realize that although your pre-teen can express their feelings they will need your support in identifying how to manage them.

Remember that, even as peers and friendships become more important to them, your children still need your continued involvement in their lives. Make it a priority to regularly contact them when they are not with you through phone calls, sending emails, texting or by participating in important activities.

THINGS TO LOOK FOR

- Taking sides with one parent over the other
- Overly anxious about the future
- Can easily move into parenting role - may feel strong need to take care of a parent
- Difficulty managing or talking about feelings

NEEDS

- Not be placed in the middle of adult issues
- Opportunity to test independence
- Not to shoulder adult responsibilities
- Consistent contact with both parents
- To be consulted on decisions that affect their lives

13 TO 18 YEARS OLD

Teenage years are a time when children begin to move away from the family and establish themselves as independent young adults. As friends and social lives are the central focus for teenagers you may need to be more flexible regarding time arrangements between homes.

Developmentally, teenagers have a tendency to be somewhat cynical about the world and when parents divorce those feelings may intensify. Often they will react by either rushing into intimate relationships or by avoiding commitment. Rather than trying to talk your teenagers out of those feelings, it is best to present the value of learning from your experiences and how they can make considered choices in their own lives.

Because teenagers are young adults, they are often exposed to more adult information than younger children. Don't make the mistake of using your teenagers as confidants or overburdening them with intimate details of the divorce. Even though they are older, they still do not want to be caught in the middle between Mother and Father.

THINGS TO LOOK FOR

- Behaving badly or engaging in dangerous, risky behaviour
- Withdrawing from the family by spending more time away from home
- Reaction or management of feelings becomes more intense
- Vulnerable to being given adult information or becoming a parent's confidant

NEEDS

- More flexible time arrangements with parents
- Parents to stay involved in life and activities
- To be consulted about decisions that affects their lives
- Reassurance about their future
- Continued structure and discipline
- Support in managing feelings in healthy ways
- Not to be overburdened with adult information

CHAPTER 3:

TIPS FOR TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT DIVORCE

Once you and your partner have decided with certainty that you are going to separate or divorce, you need to begin planning how you will tell your children. Here are some guidelines for you to consider regarding your first conversation with your children. If possible, both parents should be present when telling children about the divorce or separation. Ideally, it is best if both parents can talk to children together. However, this is only appropriate if parents are able to responsibly manage their own feelings and opinions about the divorce or separation. In some divorce situations, parents may hold differing opinions about why things did not work out or be in different stages of the emotional process. If talking to children together is ultimately going to create more tension, have separate discussions.

Discuss what you will tell children beforehand. Whether talking to children together or individually, children benefit from hearing similar messages from both Mother and Father. Try to keep explanations simple and avoid placing blame.

Use general statements such as “Mother and Father can't live together anymore” or “Mother and Father have decided we would be happier living in different homes.” If you cannot agree on what to say. Sometimes due to our own hurt and pain, we may feel strongly that children need to hear the truth. In some families, one parent may be very committed to assigning blame for the divorce. Holding one parent exclusively responsible for the divorce often creates a confusing and difficult situation for children. They will most likely feel very conflicted and worried about either betraying or rejecting a parent. Whether or not you initiated the divorce, try to view the situation through your child’s eyes. Children have a right to love both parents. Think through how you will manage your feelings. As you go through this process you will probably experience a wide range of emotions. In the early stages, feelings of sadness and anger about splitting up are usually at their strongest. To minimise the impact for your children, think through your own issues and how you will manage them in front of the children. Let children know how life will change.

TRY TO ADDRESS MAJOR CONCERNS FOR CHILDREN SUCH AS

- When and how they will see each parent
- Where they will live and go to school
- How they will spend time with important family members
- How life will be different.

If children have questions you are not prepared to answer, let them know that Mother and Father are still working out the details. Reassure them that when you have an answer, they will be the first to know. Tell children they are not to blame. It may seem hard to believe but it is quite natural for children to feel responsible when parents split up. Make sure your children understand that your decision to divorce or separate had nothing to do with them or their behavior. Additionally, children need to know that there is nothing they can do to change what is happening in the family. Also reinforce the point that it is not their responsibility to try and make things better between Mother and Father. Make sure

children know they can ask questions and talk about how they feel.

Let children know you understand this will be a difficult change for them. They also need to hear that while things are changing in the family, they will probably have many different feelings. Reassure them that it is okay to ask questions or talk to either parent.

ADDITIONAL ISSUES TO CONSIDER CHILDREN'S REACTIONS OR FEELINGS

There are many different factors that affect how children will react to separation or divorce. Some children will understandably be very upset, while others may be incredibly angry and hurt. Others might feel profound sadness, while some will show no reaction at all. In families where there has been a great deal of fighting between parents, children may even feel a sense of relief.

It is also quite common for siblings to have very different feelings and experiences. Most importantly, let children know that their feelings are normal. Be sure to give them the support and space they need to safely express how they feel. Initial talk and follow up conversations.

For initial first conversations, it is recommended that parents do not overwhelm children with information. Try to keep the discussion straightforward and age-appropriate. Focus on addressing the fact that parents are separating or getting a divorce and how life will change for now. It is likely that your children will have additional questions after your first talk and need follow up conversations. Follow up talks do not have to be formal or structured. You may find that children are open to talking during transition times such as bedtime, meal times or while engaged in other activities.

MESSAGES CHILDREN NEED TO HEAR FROM PARENTS

BELOW ARE SOME EXAMPLES OF THINGS CHILDREN NEED TO HEAR

- While the feelings we have for each other have changed, we will never stop loving you
- We know this will be hard for you and we are sorry
- You can always love both Mother and Father
- Just because we may be unhappy with each other, does not mean you have to be upset
- What has happened between Mother and Father is not your fault - you did not cause this
- Divorce is a grown-up problem between Mother and Father that you cannot change
- We will always be your Mother and Father
- You will always have a family. Instead of being a family in one home, you will have a family with Father and a family with Mother
- We will both continue to be a part of your life.

HOW TO LISTEN TO YOUR CHILDREN

Divorce and separation brings many challenges and changes to children's lives. During this time one of the most important skills you can possess is being a good listener. Give children your full attention when they are talking to you. This means turn off the television or stop putting away the groceries. Sit down and make eye to eye contact with your child. If you can't stop what you are doing, let your child know that what they have to say is very important to you. Then arrange a time with your child when you can give them your undivided attention. It is better to ask children to wait minutes not hours.

Listen to your child without trying to fix, judge, criticize or change their feelings

Typically as parents we have a strong desire to spare our children from unpleasant, hurtful or difficult situations. Since divorce can stir up a lot of those experiences, we may try to shield our children by fixing the problem or trying to convince them that they really don't feel that way. Unfortunately, our good intentions can be damaging. When children are not allowed the opportunity to solve their own problems or have their feelings acknowledged they are deprived of building both self-esteem and self-confidence. Also, it may be difficult for children to identify how they feel if parents never talk about or recognize certain feelings. Seek to understand your child's feelings and perspective.

One way we can convey understanding is by focusing on what our child is feeling and verbalizing that feeling for them. Parents can make statements such as "I can understand why you would feel that way", "It sounds like you are feeling..." or "It must be really difficult when." Also, remember that understanding does not mean you agree with your child's perspective - it just means you understand.

TAKE ACTION

Children need to talk to someone who is supportive and understanding. Taking action doesn't mean you fix the problem or give advice to your children. Once you feel you understand your child then you can make a decision about how to respond. Sometimes it may mean giving them a hug, working together to come up with solutions or having to watch them struggle with a difficult issue or problem on their own. Keep your issues separate from your children's feelings. Make sure you are utilizing a support system away from your children to deal with your own feelings. When you find yourself having a strong reaction to something your child has said or is feeling, try to stay focused on your child. If you are finding it too difficult, give yourself time out to process what is going on and how you are feeling about the situation. When necessary, get help or find support. Many of the changes divorce or separation brings can be difficult to deal with for parents. If you or

your children are having a hard time dealing with those changes, find support or seek out professional help.

IF YOUR CHILD DOESN'T WANT TO TALK

For some children talking about divorce makes it feel too real and they may not be ready to accept the fact that life is changing. If your child does not want to talk or resists discussions about divorce let them know you understand this is hard for them. You can also tell them you understand that they might not want to talk right now but when they are ready to talk you will be ready to listen. It can sometimes be helpful to find an age-appropriate children's book or other resources that can make talking about a difficult subject easier for children.

CHAPTER 4: TIPS FOR MANAGING YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR EX-SPOUSE OR EXPARTNER REDEFINE YOUR RELATIONSHIP

While your relationship with your partner or spouse has ended, your role as Mother and Father has not. For many parents it is helpful, especially in the early stages of separation or divorce to handle issues with a business-like attitude. Avoid conversations that address old issues, personal information or encourage conflict. If you are having difficulty separating your emotions from the situation or person, ask yourself how you would handle a similar situation with a fellow coworker. Sometimes it may be helpful to think about how you would want the situation handled if the roles were reversed.

CHANGE YOUR EXPECTATIONS

Following divorce or separation some parents try to control one another through resorting to manipulation, confrontation and criticism. Don't put energy into trying to control your ex or the situation. The most you can do is be the best parent you can and strive to influence your children in a nurturing, supportive way.

ADDRESS THE ISSUES

Find some way to address your issues related to the divorce or separation instead of hanging onto the anger and hurt. Dealing with your feelings will also help you to be less reactive when issues arise involving your children or your ex. Remember, moving forward is important for both you and your children. If you are having difficulty doing so, find some help.

ADDRESS THE OTHER PARENT IN A RESPECTFUL MANNER

While you may not have a tremendous amount of respect for your ex as a person, you can talk to them respectfully as the parent of your children. When discussing issues or addressing disagreements, avoid making personal attacks including statements that judge, criticize or assign blame to one another.

PRACTISE RESTRAINT AND AVOID REACTING WHEN ANGRY

Try to listen to each other's opinions and ideas before responding. If something said by the other parent stirs up strong feelings, try not to act on your immediate reaction. If necessary, ask for a proper discussion and give yourself time to think things over.

GIVE THE OTHER PARENT NOTICE REGARDING ISSUES

Instead of springing an issue or discussion on the other parent, it may be more helpful to let them know beforehand that you want to discuss something, (perhaps through a short phone message or email). If contact is made either by telephone or in person, before launching into a discussion, consider asking "Is this a good time to talk?" If not, ask to arrange a time that is mutually convenient. Avoid using handovers as a time to discuss issues with the other parent. While it may seem convenient to discuss arrangements

while exchanging the children, handovers are often emotionally charged times for both children and parents. If you have something you need to share or discuss, it may be best to make a phone call, write a short letter to hand to the other parent or ask to arrange a time when you can talk with them. If meeting face-to-face is necessary, consider holding discussions in a neutral setting. Meeting in a public place can sometimes be more productive for parents than sitting at the kitchen table. Places like a local coffee shop or restaurant may also reduce the likelihood that things will get heated or out of hand.

Do not have heated arguments or discussions in front of your children. Parent conflict is one of the most damaging aspects of divorce or separation for children - so do not involve your children in an argument between the two of you. Additionally consider the best times to arrange telephone conversations with the other parent and make sure children will not be able to listen in.

FOLLOW UP ALL AGREEMENTS OR DETAILS OF CONVERSATIONS IN WRITING

If you and the other parent have made a change in plans or come to an agreement involving the children, follow it up in writing. It is not uncommon for parents to walk away with different understandings about what was said or agreed. A written follow up will help minimize misunderstandings.

"Speak when you are angry and you will make the best speech you will ever regret." Ambrose Bierce

CHAPTER 5: LESS THAN IDEAL SITUATIONS

While much of the advice offered to separated and divorced parents focuses on developing a cooperative parenting relationship, there are some situations where these ideals may not apply. Any circumstance that places a child at risk either emotionally or

physically must be managed in a way that protects and preserves the child's safety. Situations that require special consideration are:

- Domestic abuse – physical, emotional or sexual abuse toward a parent
- Physical, emotional or sexual abuse of a child
- Addiction issues
- Parental neglect or abandonment
- Alienation of children by a parent.

While it is important for children to maintain a loving relationship with both Mother and Father, the physical and emotional well-being of children should always come first. It is important to note that a difference in parenting styles or values does not automatically mean a child is in danger. A parent allowing children to have crisps and fizzy drinks for dinner while watching the television until midnight is very different to a parent who drives a car containing children while intoxicated. Situations that involve parenting differences need to be addressed but not necessarily to the same degree. “It is extremely important that you offer emotional support to children to help them cope with difficult situations involving domestic abuse and addiction”.

DOMESTIC ABUSE AND ADDICTION

In some situations, especially those involving domestic violence or addiction issues, a parent may try to minimize the seriousness of the abuse/violence, or not talk about it, all in an effort to shield children from what is happening in the family. In fact, most children are keenly aware of the abuse. As many as 80% of children are either in the same room or in the next room when domestic violence occurs.

Other parents may hang on to the hope that the behaviour of the abusing parent will eventually change and therefore work to keep the peace instead of protecting themselves and their children. When this happens, the non-offending parent places both themselves and their children at enormous risk. Even when things improve for a time, significant change can only occur if the

offending parent has acknowledged the problem and is actively seeking professional help. If you are a non-offending parent you need to be relentless in advocating the safety of your child or children. In many cases, this means getting the protection of the legal system. You should tell your lawyer if the other parent has threatened you, hurt you physically or sexually, controlled or isolated you or has behaved in an emotionally abusive way towards you. Your lawyer will be able to advise you about an application for an injunction which would prohibit further behaviour of this nature or prohibit the other parent from coming to your home.

Your lawyer can also advise you about making arrangements for contact between your children and the other parent that do not expose either you or the children to these risks. In addition to physically protecting children, it is extremely important that you offer emotional support to help them cope with difficult situations involving domestic abuse and addiction. Often children involved in these types of situations have ambivalent feelings about the other parent. Some may feel deeply responsible for a parent's behaviour, while others may feel quite conflicted and worry about betraying one or both parents. How children are able to handle difficult situations is influenced by many different factors but one of the most significant aspects is how parents talk to children and help them understand the situation.

TIPS FOR HELPING CHILDREN MANAGE DIFFICULT SITUATIONS

Acknowledge what has happened and allow children to talk. Some parents mistakenly believe that talking to children about a serious situation such as domestic violence or addiction will either overwhelm or scare children. In fact, not talking about the situation leaves children defenseless and often more afraid because they do not understand what has happened or why. Talk to your children openly and honestly, offering them age appropriate explanations and information. Children usually feel a great sense of relief when they have received permission from a parent to talk about the situation. Children also need to know that they can talk

about their feelings and ask questions without being fearful of making things worse or getting into trouble.

If you are unsure what to say to your children, seek out professional support or guidance.

EDUCATE YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT THE PROBLEM

- Along with supporting children's feelings it is vital that you educate them about the problem. Educating children helps them:
- Understand the situation is not something they can influence or control
- Identify dysfunctional behavior
- Increase the likelihood that they will not repeat the behavior in their own lives
- Build skills instead of feeling afraid
- Feel empowered instead of helpless

Also, help children learn how to keep themselves safe by teaching personal protection skills such as when and how to call for emergency help, how to find and approach a safe adult when there is a crisis and how to recognize and avoid unsafe situations. Talk about the problem not the person. While it may be challenging at times, avoid making statements that criticize or condemn the other parent. Help your child to understand the dynamics of the issue, abuse or addiction in a way they can understand. If it is helpful, seek out resources for children such as books or educational pamphlets that will help to explain the issues. Children need to know that their safety takes priority over everything else. Let them know that the destructive behavior is not appropriate and that you hope in the future their other parent will be able to make better choices.

REINFORCE THAT WHAT HAS HAPPENED IS NOT THEIR FAULT

Many children in difficult situations feel guilty or responsible for what has happened in the family. Make sure your children know

that the situation is not their fault and that they cannot change their other parent's behavior. It is also helpful to let children know that no matter how much they may hope or wish, the other parent is the only one who can change the situation. Inform your children about how life will change for now. When domestic violence or addiction issues are involved, contact between parents and children may need to be suspended or supervised. If this occurs, talk to your children in an age appropriate way. Let them know in clear terms when and how they will see their other parent. If contact is not possible, be sure to support your child's feelings. It is normal for a child to have mixed feelings about not seeing the other parent. While they may truly appreciate being in a safer situation, they may also have difficulty letting go of the wish that everything could be okay. Provide children with a stable and consistent environment. Children who have lived with domestic violence or addiction experience very chaotic and unpredictable lives. Although the process of divorce can bring even more changes to a family, do what you can to create a consistent, predictable and peaceful home environment for your children. Children can actually make a successful adjustment and heal from the past with the support of one consistent, loving, stable parent in their lives. Seek support for both you and your children. Healing for families who have dealt with these issues takes time. Be sure that you seek support for yourself, as well as, your children. While reaching out to others can be hard to do, it is an important part of making life better for your family.

WHEN ONE PARENT TURNS A CHILD AGAINST THE OTHER

When one parent turns a child against the other parent, this is known as parent alienation. This occurs when a child is significantly influenced by one parent (often called 'the alienator') to completely reject their other parent (often known as 'the target parent'). It is most often seen in situations involving separation or divorce and the child's rejection is usually based on frivolous or unjustified reasons.

This situation is often referred to as parental alienation syndrome or PAS. It literally places children in a situation where they must view one parent as all bad and one parent as all good. This leaves no space for a child to love both parents. Given that children view themselves as half Mother and half Father, the end result is that the child is forced both emotionally and psychologically to deny or reject a part of themselves. When a child distances his or herself from a parent, parent alienation may not be to blame. Sometimes parents may alienate themselves from a child by engaging in destructive, abusive, harmful or hurtful behaviors. When a parent has behaved badly and does not take responsibility for that behaviour, children may distance themselves from that parent. If a child does not want to spend time with a parent, it is important for that parent to consider how they may have contributed to the problem. However, sometimes parents jump to the conclusion that the other parent is exclusively responsible for the rejection. Hostile aggressive parenting (or HAP), a term closely related to parental alienation syndrome (PAS), is used to define the actions and behaviors of an alienating parent. It is most often seen in high conflict situations where an adult has not been able to move beyond their own hurt and pain regarding the separation or divorce. As a result, the alienating parent uses the child or children as a way to manipulate, control or seek revenge on the target parent. These parents are unable to acknowledge the needs of their child and are more apt to view children as belonging exclusively to them. They are often unable to see the damage they are inflicting on children. While HAP has the potential to develop into parental alienation syndrome, it does not always lead to the rejection of the target parent by a child. It does however greatly interfere with the development of a healthy parent-child relationship.

Hostile aggressive parenting can also extend beyond the parent-child relationship to include other significant adults in a child's life such as grandparents or step-parents. Although there is significant debate within the family court system and amongst childcare professionals over how parent alienation and hostile aggressive

parenting should be handled, it is important for parents to understand the dynamics of these high conflict situations.

TIPS FOR MANAGING PARENTAL ALIENATION SYNDROME AND HOSTILE AGGRESSIVE PARENTING.

Both parent alienation and hostile aggressive parenting can be hugely challenging for a parent whose relationship with their child is being compromised.

THE FOLLOWING TIPS CAN HELP PARENTS TO DEAL WITH THESE EXTREMELY DIFFICULT SITUATIONS

GET EDUCATION AND PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

Parental alienation syndrome and hostile aggressive parenting are extremely challenging situations. Repairing your relationship with your child can be a long and difficult process. Make sure you are taking care of yourself through this process by handling your feelings about the situation in a healthy adult way. Also, seek good legal representation when necessary. Target parents faced with parent alienation or hostile aggressive parenting almost always have to utilize the legal system to protect the relationship with their children. Make sure your lawyer is educated about these dynamics and how the family court views parental alienation syndrome and hostile aggressive parenting.

BEHAVE WITH INTEGRITY

Just because the other parent is not focused on the needs of the children doesn't mean you have to behave in the same way. Don't be trapped into thinking that you are helpless. You may not have control over the other parent's actions but you do have control over how you respond and how you handle the situation with your children. Don't let the situation take over your life. Find some support for yourself and as much as possible, limit the amount of emotional energy you give to the conflict.

MAINTAIN CONTACT AND BE CONSISTENT WITH CHILDREN

Some parents mistakenly believe that with time their children will eventually realize the truth, know that they have been lied to and come back to them. In fact, maintaining consistent contact with your children is especially important. With parent alienation, children need an alternate perception of reality. If a parent does not maintain contact, children are left with no defence against the alienator's perspective. Despite their attempts to reject you, continue to follow through with what you say you will do. While it can be incredibly frustrating, do what you can to stay connected to your children.

DO NOT PUT YOUR CHILD IN THE MIDDLE OF ADULT ISSUES

If you are angry about something the other parent has done, address that issue with the other parent or the court.

DON'T BLAME YOUR CHILDREN FOR THE REJECTION

In normal parenting situations it is reasonable to hold your children accountable for inappropriate and disrespectful behaviour. But parent alienation or hostile aggressive parenting are not normal circumstances. Children are literally being placed in a situation where, in order to be embraced by one parent, they must reject the other. If your relationship with your child is in jeopardy, the first and most important goal is to preserve your relationship and emotional connection with your child.

TRY TO UNDERSTAND YOUR CHILD'S POSITION

It is incredibly stressful and difficult for children when they are placed in a situation where they must side with one parent over the other. Consider the stress you are experiencing as an adult in dealing with this issue and imagine how your child feels having to live with this stress day after day.

AVOID TAKING THE REJECTION PERSONALLY

While it is incredibly painful to be rejected by your child, it is important to understand it is not a situation your child can control or successfully manage without support.

OFFER CHILDREN AN ALTERNATE PERCEPTION OF REALITY WHENEVER POSSIBLE.

It is okay to say that you do not agree with how the other parent is handling this situation. However, be careful not to blame, judge or criticise the other parent – these actions may push your child further away. Because this is such a difficult and frustrating situation, some parents may feel that if they tell their children the ‘truth’, try to set the record straight and aggressively fight the situation, their children will see they are obviously the victimised parent. In most cases, this will not happen. Furthermore, when parents do this they are also engaging in alienating behaviour and are asking the child to choose one parent as right and one as wrong.

GIVE CLEAR MESSAGES TO YOUR CHILDREN

THESE MESSAGES MIGHT INCLUDE:

- Children should not have to pick and choose one parent over the other
- This is an issue between Mother and Father
- Your feelings do not have to be the same as Mother’s or Father’s
- Kids should always be able to love both parents.

DON'T GIVE UP

When dealing with high conflict situations it can sometimes be hard to see how your actions are making a difference. In some parent-child relationships it may take years before you will see the results of your choices and effort. Don’t make the mistake of thinking you do not matter to your children - you do.