



# What About the Children?

## A SIMPLE GUIDE FOR DIVORCED/SEPARATED AND DIVORCING PARENTS



Donald A. Gordon, Ph.D.

The Center for Divorce Education  
Ashland, Oregon

10th Edition





# About CDE

The Center for Divorce Education is based in Ashland, Oregon.

The CDE Mission: CDE is dedicated to advocating for children and helping parents to minimize the harmful effects that divorce and separation has on children.

The goals of CDE include:

- 1** educating the public, domestic relations referees and judges, and legislators on the effects of divorce and resulting residential arrangements on the emotional, social, intellectual and physical development of children;
- 2** disseminating the most promising options for families in transition through publications, workshops, and the visual media;
- 3** developing, evaluating, producing, and making available effective educational interventions for parents and children of divorced, separating and divorcing families.

While concerned about the impact of family loss on parents, we at CDE view our primary role as advocates for children. Many of our positions or recommendations may overlap with one special interest group or another; however, we maintain a firm independence. The views and positions of CDE are the result of careful consideration of the best available research and clinical and judicial experience.

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First Edition, 1990  
Second Edition, 1990  
Third Edition, 1992  
Fourth Edition, 1996  
Fifth Edition, 2001  
Sixth Edition, 2008  
Seventh Edition, 2010  
Eighth Edition, 2011  
Ninth Edition, 2016  
Tenth Edition, 2022

The First Edition was made possible by a grant from the Charles A. Dunklee Foundation of Cleveland, Ohio.

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# WHAT ABOUT THE CHILDREN?

## A GUIDE FOR SEPARATED AND DIVORCING PARENTS

### INTRODUCTION

In 1960, only one-sixth of all marriages ended in a breakup. Today, the divorce rate is almost 50% and the breakup rate for unmarried parents is even higher. Sadly, adults are not the only ones who feel the pain of family separation; children are often more affected by family breakups than are adults.

This booklet goes in depth to examine the effects that parents' separation or divorce have on children. It also addresses what parents can and should do to minimize those negative effects, and maximize the chances that children will grow up as healthy, happy, and well-adjusted as possible. Specifically, we will cover important topics such as:

- how children experience the disruption of family breakups;
- how you can help your children through this difficult process;
- where to turn for resources to improve your relationships with your children during and after the family breakup;
- how to improve your communication skills so you can reduce conflict with your ex-spouse or ex-partner; and
- what to do when domestic violence and safety issues are issues.

### Abuse and Safety Considerations<sup>1</sup>

Soon we'll go into depth regarding domestic violence and abuse issues. For now, however, before we dive into the many other important topics, it is very important to have a plan in place if you believe you or your children are suffering physical, sexual, or emotional abuse from the other parent. **You and your children's safety is a number one priority.** If you or your children are currently being threatened, call 911 or the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233 (or for hearing impaired, TTY service is available through 1-800-787-3224). The hotline will refer you to services near you that can help. You may also need to talk to a lawyer to legally keep you and your children safe. **All adults have a duty to keep children safe from abuse or witnessing ongoing violence.** In these cases, some of the skills and strategies we discuss in this booklet may not be appropriate for your situation – at least until things have calmed down and become more stable and safe.

<sup>1</sup> This section adapted with permission from Judicial Council of California (2014)

## Divorce and Single-Parent Trends

Children are involved in about 60% of all breakups. Each year, a million children experience separation of their parents. Over the years, the number of homes with a single parent has increased due to breakups and an increasing number of parents who never marry. Now over 40% of newborn children have parents who never marry. Half of the children born in the 1990s and later will live with a single parent.

Even five years after a family breakup, many children continue to struggle. Only one-third of them adjust and feel good about themselves, and do well with school, friends, and home. Another one-third of the children still have a few problems. This group often feels unhappy and angry. They have low self-esteem. The last third of children of separated parents are not doing well at all. This group is still very unhappy years after the breakup. They are angry and dissatisfied with life. They are often depressed and lonely, and are most at risk for bad behavior (drug and alcohol abuse, criminal behavior, etc.).

Many children go through a breakup more than one time. This causes even more pain. About 85% of people who split up will marry or couple again within five years. 60% of second marriages also end. About 40% of second breakups involve children. Three out of four parents will marry for a third time, and often the cycle continues. Clearly, wanting to be married and “practicing” several times does not always mean you know how to succeed at it.

Currently, less than seven out of ten children live with both of their parents. A mom and dad and 2.4 children living together is an American myth. Today, there are many more stepparent families than natural families.

Breakups can cause problems that last into the children’s adult life, but parents can take steps to prevent or minimize these problems, such as using the knowledge and skills provided in this educational program. The steps outlined in this booklet show parents simple things they can do to greatly improve the adjustment of their children.



### *The family is changing.*

*A “traditional” family is two parents and their children living in the same home (only 1/3 of all U.S. families).*

*More and more parents breakup or do not marry.*

*In Canada, more unmarried couples live together than married couples.*

*40% of children are born to parents who never marry.*

# 1 EFFECTS OF BREAK-UPS ON CHILDREN

Most parents ask themselves some hard questions when they split up, especially about what the breakup will do to their children.

- Will the children understand what is going on?
- How will they react to each parent as the family changes?
- Will they be OK with a new step-parent?
- Will they be OK if there are step-siblings?
- Will their grades in school suffer? Will they pull away from their friends?
- Will they suffer some emotional harm forever?
- Does the age of children make a difference?
- Is it different for boys than for girls?

For most parents, the important thing is that their children survive the split-up. They want their children to grow up to be healthy adults. Some are even better off than if the parents had remained together (for example, due to abuse in the home or high conflict). Mature children whose parents care about how they feel may not have many serious problems.

Included in this booklet is information from researchers and other professionals who work with separated families. Some of this research is listed at the end of this booklet. As you read, keep in mind that **each child is unique** in how they handle family breakups. **Not all children go through every challenge we cover.**

## HOW TO TALK TO YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT THE FAMILY BREAK UP

It is normal to want to avoid this talk, as parents don't want to hurt their children.

It is important to talk to your children as soon as possible, before any major change happens. This way they will trust you to be open with them. This is a time to talk to your children about their feelings about the break-up, not yours. Give much thought to the setting and circumstances when you break the news. Do not underestimate how long your children will remember that moment. They remember it into adulthood.

Gather the whole family and tell them together. Don't tell them separately and at different times and make a child carry the burden of keeping a secret. Be mature and accept responsibility. Blaming the other parent makes the children feel they have to take sides. Research shows children being pressured to take side causes them the most long term pain. Allow at least an hour. Don't do it right before bedtime, in the car on the way to daycare or school, or just before you or your partner leave for work.

To get control of your feelings for this talk, write down what you want to cover before the talk. In some cases, you might be excited about the changes, but your children won't be.

Keep the language simple, depending on their age. Be truthful to avoid confusion and pain. Do not encourage the children to have reconciliation fantasies.

It will reassure your children that you both will work to make the change less painful if you talk to them together. This will reassure them that one parent won't abandon them, which is children's worst fear. If that is not possible because of a high level of conflict, agree ahead of time with your co-parent what you will cover and present the same details to the children.

## WHAT TO COVER

- They are not responsible for the break-up. Their parents could not solve problems together so that they can keep living together. For example: "Mom and Dad have problems with each other and can't live together. We have tried very hard to work out these problems. We decided living separately would be better. This has nothing to do with you. It is just between Mom and Dad. We are really sorry that this is causing you pain. We will work together to help take the pain away." <sup>1a</sup>
- You will always love them, no less after the changes. Nothing they do or say will make you love them less.
- They still have a family, including both parents, grandparents and other favorite relatives.
- Explain who they will live with if you are not dividing the time 50-50. Tell them how often they will see their other parent.
- Which routines will stay the same and which will change (bedtime, school, meals, pets). Try hard to keep as many routines the same as before the break-up. Children are comforted by routines during time of upsetting change.
- Let them express their feelings. Really listen, using Active Listening. Be fully present and focus on their feelings instead of your own. Older children will probably express anger. Do not become defensive and allow them to have these feelings. Younger children often blame themselves. Teens are likely to blame at least one of their parents.

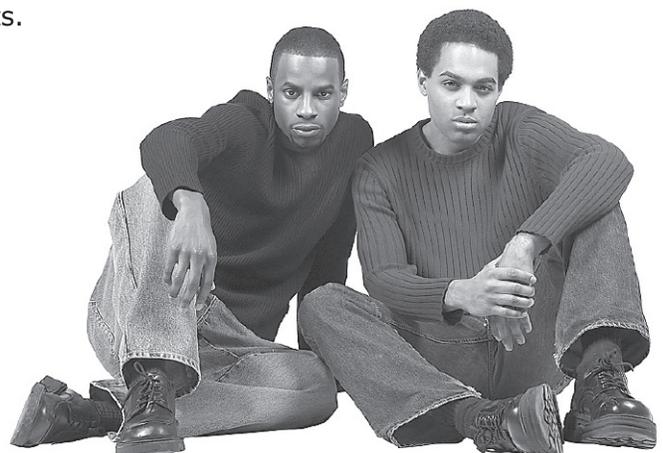
Preteens and teens are developing a strong sense of right and wrong. They will see the break-up as unfair to them. They will worry about what their friends will think of them.

At the end of your talk, ask your children about any fears they have and any questions. If you don't know how a particular issue will be resolved, say so. Reassure them you will let them know when you do. From time to time prompt them to ask questions and tell you how they are feeling. Over time they will come up with more questions and fears.

Your children may want to be alone for awhile, going to their rooms, or the younger children may want to sit quietly and cuddle with you. Give them space and time. Let them know you are always available to talk and answer questions. After the talk, don't get busy with something else. Remain attentive and available. They will need reassurance that they are a priority. They will judge you by your actions more than your words.

Talk with your children individually also. Younger children will have different fears and feelings from older children. Talk to them in language they understand.

Include a support system. Tell anyone else who needs to know, including teachers, babysitters, and friends' parents. Let them know what's happening and ask them to tell you if they see any unusual behavior.



<sup>1a</sup> The Good Karma Divorce: Avoid litigation, turn negative emotions into positive actions, and get on with the rest of your life. (2010) Hon. Michele Lowrance. NY: Harper Collins.

## How truthful should you be?

For every truth you think of telling your children, ask yourself how damaging it might be. Your children are not emotionally developed enough to deal with harmful truths (faults of the other parent). Be careful about your nonverbal communication. Children pick up a lot. Your eye movements convey many different emotions. Unspoken negativity about the other parent comes through. Ask yourself if being right or honest when it may do harm is more important than your children's happiness. Learning damaging things about a parent is similar to an adult being betrayed by a loved one or a friend.<sup>1b</sup>

Teach your children the feelings are manageable and not overwhelming. Remind them that their feelings change, as yours do. Think of an example where your child was angry with a friend one day and playing with them the next day. Schedule a time each week, preferably the same time, where your children can say anything they want without your criticizing or defending yourself. Michele Lowrance calls this the "free speech zone." It is a regular time when children should feel safe to speak freely about their emotions and fears. You could make a chart for the kitchen or family room to help them identify feelings. Put a list of all the feelings they might have on one side, with the days of the week across the top. Your child can check off that feeling for a certain day and write down the topic. For the free speech zone meeting, you can discuss that chart and encourage problem solving.<sup>1c</sup>

There is no getting around the pain the family break-up will cause. You can turn this into an opportunity to teach your children how to deal with pain effectively. This will help them throughout life.

## What Children Often Experience<sup>2</sup>

Children often experience anger, sadness, rejection and guilt after parents separate. All of these emotions are confusing. They may also experience emotions such as relief, which they then feel guilty about.

Like adults, children experience stages of loss and grief as part of the separation process. They often experience these emotions in the following stages:

### **Stage 1: DENIAL.**

My parents will get back together again.

### **Stage 2: ANGER.**

How can you do this to me? You let me down. If you really loved me, you would stay together.

### **Stage 3: BARGAINING.**

If I am really good, maybe you will get back together again.

### **Stage 4: DEPRESSION.**

I feel empty inside and nothing can make it go away.

### **Stage 5: ACCEPTANCE.**

My parents are not going to get back together. It's okay that my friends know my parents aren't together anymore.

As with adults, children may not go through these stages in any particular order and the time the process takes varies from child to child.

<sup>1b</sup> The Good Karma Divorce, pp. 177-179.

<sup>1c</sup> The Good Karma Divorce, pp. 180-181.

<sup>2</sup> This section adapted with permission from Judicial Council of California (2014)

## Children's worst fears

- I did something wrong and that is why my parents are separating. It's my fault.
- If my parents loved each other before and now they don't, they might stop loving me, too.

## What children most want to know

Research and the experience of professionals over the past 20 years tell us what children of separated parents most want to know:

- My parents will continue to love me.
- My parents will stop fighting.
- Both of my parents will be here in my life.
- If I can't have that, at least one of my parents will be here in my life.

## CHILDREN FROM HIGH CONFLICT FAMILIES ARE AT GREATER RISK

All the research supports this conclusion. Conflict is the single best predictor that children of divorce will not adjust well. The solution is up to mom and dad. Until they can resolve issues and end conflict, they should try not to expose the children to their fighting.

Conflict between parents does not begin during the breakup. Children have typically been exposed to conflict long before the family breakup. Divorce and breakups often happen because of long-term problems with chronic anger and hostility. There may be verbal abuse and physical violence.

If there was little conflict before the breakup, children become confused. Since they did not see much fighting, they are shocked when their parents suddenly split up. This causes them to distrust their parents. When parent conflict is high (or if there is physical violence), children are often relieved by the breakup. These children will adjust better over time. But they are often badly affected by the violence even while they are relieved. Parents can learn to handle conflict without violence. Divorce is not the only solution for violent partners.

Conflict usually becomes more intense during the breakup process. It may remain quite high for months or years to come. Usually it declines with the passage of time as parents begin to accept the changes in their lives.



# DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Domestic violence is more than a disagreement or normal conflict. Other terms for domestic violence are: spousal abuse, intimate partner abuse, or coercive control. It is done to dominate the partner. It is an ongoing abuse of power using threats and intimidation, and includes physical, sexual and emotional abuse.

**Physical abuse** includes hitting, shoving, choking, pushing, throwing objects, punching walls, or kidnapping. It can be violent and severe. Weapons may also be used to cause fear. Any act that causes physical injury is physical abuse. But physical abuse could also involve slapping, pulling hair, pushing, or grabbing without causing severe or obvious injury. These assaults can make a partner feel trapped.

**Sexual abuse** includes forced sex (rape) and can simply involve unwanted touching. Threats or other means of force to make a partner do something sexual they don't want to do is abuse. To degrade a partner in a sexual way is abuse. Rape also makes homicide more likely.

**Emotional abuse** means name-calling and put-downs that hurt a partner's pride. It can include insults about their looks or intelligence, or threats, yelling, name calling, isolating, threatening children or pets, and humiliating behaviors. It can include insults about their behavior - or their skills as a parent. Emotional abuse occurs when a partner tries to make a partner feel crazy. It occurs when the abuser makes jealous accusations. These acts are meant to frighten a partner.

**Isolation** refers to acts that prevent a partner from leading a normal social life. Visits with friends, family, or co-workers are controlled. The abuser limits where they go or how they spend their time. Their relationship with professionals who can help is also restricted.

**Intimidation** means any threats, implied or real. Threats let someone know they, or their child, will suffer if they displease a partner. To stalk, make threats of harm, or invading a person's privacy are all acts of intimidation.

**Control** involves depriving someone of some freedom over their activities, decisions, or other functions. A partner may deny money, medicine, or other vital things. The controller may even take their money. A partner may make "rules" for how the other partner is expected to perform in the relationship.

The effects of domestic violence on the dominated partner are many, and may cause any variety of physical and emotional problems in the abused partner, such as:

- Depression and anxiety, including thoughts of suicide
- Eating disorders
- Substance abuse
- Sleep problems
- Panic attacks
- Low self-esteem leads many to stay in the abusive relationship. The abuser knows this and tries to keep the other person feeling bad about himself or herself.
- Disturbing memories or "flashbacks"
- Feelings of worthless or helplessness. They may believe that nothing they or others can do will end the abuse.
- Belief that the abuse is their fault.

Control and isolation restrict the ability to make decisions on one's own. This affects choices in key areas of life. These include decisions a parent must make. Many liberties are taken away by domestic violence. These liberties are vital to the rights of being a citizen and of being a person. Those restrictions also fall on the children and narrow their world.

**Domestic violence often involves children.** The children may be abused instead of the partner. Children who have an abused parent are often abused themselves. They are badly affected by abuse. They feel anger, misery, and intense terror. If these children are not well-adjusted, are less intelligent, or don't have friends, the effects are worse. They can develop physical problems and deep depression. They may become aggressive and have problems in school. They feel helpless since they can't stop the violence. They may also have trouble in relationships with other children. They may not be able to sleep, have nightmares, or worse.

All children are exposed when domestic violence occurs. They may be directly or indirectly affected (although parents may not believe children are affected). How they are affected depends on the type of abuse and how much of it they were exposed to. It depends on their personal development, strength, and how much the abused parent is able to protect them.

Children may feel afraid and helpless when they witness or hear abuse. Often they are 'used' by a partner who tries to control the other partner. They may suffer an indirect effect if the abuser is removed from the home or arrested.

It is most often the mother who is being dominated in an abusive relationship. This may cause children to copy violence and control in his own relationships with peers, or as adults. When children have been exposed to domestic violence, it is important for a trained professional to evaluate them and for the children to be offered support if this is available.

Domestic violence may continue during a separation or after a divorce. It may even increase. If you or your children have been exposed to domestic violence, you have options:

If you think you may be a victim of domestic violence, take a survey online at <http://psychcentral.com/dvquiz.htm>. It will help you understand what you may be going through. **Get help immediately** if you or your children are exposed to domestic violence.

**This is very important.** Domestic violence is a crime. Immediate help for the person who is abused is available from shelters, police, courts or other agencies in your community. As an immediate step, an abused partner can get a court order ("a protective order") to prohibit or limit contact with them or the children.

You have options when the children have been exposed to domestic violence in the home.

*These can be a useful guide:*

**OPTION 1:** You believe your children cannot be safe alone with the other parent. If this is the case, consider supervised parenting time or no parenting time.

**OPTION 2:** You think your children can safely spend limited time with the other parent under certain conditions (such as under supervision of a third party). In this case, allow no overnight parenting time.

**OPTION 3:** You believe your children can safely spend time with the other parent, but you don't feel safe with the other parent. Allow overnight parenting time, and use public (and maybe supervised) drop off and pick up sites.



# Common Problems Children Will Face Depending on their Stage in Life

## INFANTS (0–18 months)

Infants are completely dependent on parents or caregivers. They need to establish trust in their environment. Infants attach to their parents at about 6-7 months. It is very important that they interact with both parents if possible. This is more important for infants than it is for older children.

Interaction should occur regularly and often. A good rule of thumb for infants who have become attached to both parents is that they have contact with both parents every other day or every third day. Parents must be able to get along and control their conflict. If there is a lot of tension and conflict, it can disrupt infants and young children's sense of safety and security. Overnight visits with the non-residential parent may not be a good idea until parental cooperation is improved.

Emotional sensitivity and responsiveness to the baby are even more important than physical care. The schedule should permit time for both parents to be involved in normal parenting activities. These include feeding, bathing, napping, and play. Both homes need to have similar security items like blankets, toys, pacifiers, or other similar items that are comforting to the children. The two households should also have similar daily schedules, like bedtime and feeding. Introducing new things such as solid foods and drinking cups should be done at the same time by both parents.

### *Infant Temperament*<sup>3</sup>

Temperament is a set of traits we are born with that affect the way children react in different situations, including separation or divorce of their parents. These traits are evident in babies, and can generally be seen into adulthood. Temperament Traits include and can be observed as follows:

- **Activity:** Is the person almost always moving and doing something ("hard to sit still") or do they have a more relaxed ("laid back") style?
- **Routine:** Do they have regular eating and sleeping patterns, or are they always changing?
- **Confident vs. Shy:** Do they embrace and enjoy new situations and people, or tend to shy away or avoid new circumstances?
- **Easy-going:** Does the person easily adjust to changes in routines or plans, or react irritably, grouchy, or confused in reaction to changes?
- **Intense or Calm:** Do they have strong reactions to situations, either positive or negative (overly excited, outbursts, etc.), or tend to react in a calm, quiet, patient manner?
- **Mood:** Is there generally a more negative attitude or reaction to daily situations, or more positive, optimistic, "glass-half-full" outlook? Does their mood frequently shift ("mood swings"), or is it usually even-tempered?
- **Drive:** Do they give up quickly when a task becomes difficult or does he/she keep on trying? Do they stick with an activity for long periods, or do they tend to wander?
- **Distractible:** Does the person get easily distracted from an activity or can they shut out distractions and stick with the current activity?
- **Touchy:** Is the person bothered by loud noises, bright lights, or new food textures, or do they tend to ignore them and "go with the flow"?

<sup>3</sup> Paraphrased from Kline and Deutsch (2014), which was adapted from Alicia Lieberman's *Flexible, Fearful or Feisty* DVD, developed for the California Department of Education and WestEd (1990).

Based on combinations of these traits, infants tend to take on one of the three following general personality “types:”

***FLEXIBLE*** (easy-going, able to adapt):

- The most common type (found in about 40% of the population).
- Generally has regular patterns, positive mood, low intensity, low sensitivity, and is easy-going in changing situations.
- Children in this category may transition well, but might not get their needs met if they do not speak up when they could or should.
- These children often get along in the world without “making waves” because they are so even-tempered and adaptable.

***CAUTIOUS*** (slow-to-warm-up, shy, fearful, passive):

- About 15% of the population.
- Tend to withdraw and/or cry, especially during stressful situations.
- May need more time to adapt to changing settings.
- Sometimes too connected to people and places (clingy); but develop these connections slowly. Children in this category do best with
  - slow transitions,
  - familiar settings,
  - stable routines,
  - objects that help them make a transition through change (holding on to a familiar stuffed animal, blanket, or toy), and
  - a preview or warning of changes before they occur.
- Often have more trouble living in two homes; one caregiver may be easier to manage for these children.
- The more settings to which they are required to adapt (e.g., daycare, preschool, etc.), the more difficult it is for them to stay on an even keel.
- Siblings can sometimes be protective and helpful during changes, if there isn’t conflict between them.
- May find it difficult to leave either parent and may act clingy or whiny before, during, or after changes.
- Need routines they can count on as they do not react well to sudden changes.
- For babies, transitions to new homes and routines should be carefully planned.

***FEISTY*** (difficult, fussy, over-active):

- About 10% of the population.
- High intensity, unstable, over-active behavior, distractible, sensitive, and moody. Often described as “a handful.”
- Need calm surroundings, patience, flexibility, and frequent vigorous activity.
- Transitions from setting to setting can be challenging for children with this temperament.
- Need plenty of warning to stop what they are doing before a change occurs, and a “preview” of what is coming, as they do not easily shift gears.
- May “test” parents’ follow-through when it is time to make a transition and may be disobedient or unhappy after moving from one house to another.

Parents often blame each other for children's challenging behavior – thinking that a child is reacting to something the other parent is not doing or is doing wrong. This assumption can make conflict between parents worse. But a child's reactions may not be the fault of the other parent. Children's behavior is often an effort to have some control over their world. For most children, transitions get easier over time.

One of the things outside helpers and court workers need to keep in mind is the fit between parents' and children's styles. Parents often need to adjust their own reactions when they clash with their children's responses to them or the situation. For example, taking deep breaths, pausing before reacting, and using other skills taught through the *Children in Between*<sup>4</sup> course (e.g., reframing, self-talk, etc.) can be helpful to reduce arguments or worsening of the child's reactions.

Helping children manage transitions to changing or new situations is important – through calming them, talking about skills they can use to help themselves (deep breathing, holding on to soothing objects, etc.), and other tools. Further, it is important to remain patient as the child works out how he or she feels (rather than putting down their feelings – “quit your crying” or “get over it!”). Or for over-active children, seeking creative or high-energy activities for children to express or occupy themselves could be helpful. These parental tactics are important, but may not be natural for parents. When parents become more aware of their own temperament as well as the children's, they can be more effective.

It is the parents' job to actively help with changes in children's lives. Using communication skills and activities that consider the children's general style will be most helpful. As children become school age and older, they learn how to better adapt their own styles to fit with the needs of a situation; but this will be most fruitful if parents have helped them do so along the way.

For each life stage in the following pages, you will find checklists you can use that summarize some reactions your children may experience. You can then check off whether these are a “Problem” or “No Problem” beside “What to watch for.”



- Avoid criticizing the other parent.***
- Promise access to the other parent.***
- Give clear and consistent affection.***
- Let them know of the other parent's continuing care and love for them.***
- Avoid conflict in front of the children.***

<sup>4</sup> For more information about the Children in Between online course, go to <https://online.divorce-education.com/>

## **PROBLEM CHECKLIST FOR INFANTS (0-18 MONTHS) <sup>5</sup>**

### **Issues**

- Consistency of caregivers, environment and routine
- Emotional connection with caregiver
- Nurturing and love

### **What to watch for**

	Problem	No Problem
● Sleeping changes	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
● Eating changes	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
● Clingy behavior/difficulty separating	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

### **What you can do to help**

- Maintain consistency in people and routines change routines gradually
- Avoid angry expressions and emotional outbursts in front of the baby
- Don't fight in front of babies

## **PROBLEM CHECKLIST FOR TODDLERS (18 MONTHS TO 3 YEARS)**

### **Issues**

- Consistency of caregivers, environment and routine
- Fear absent parent has disappeared
- Nurturing and love
- Concern about security (who will take care of me?)

### **What to watch for**

	Problem	No Problem
● Increased crying	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
● Trouble getting to sleep/nightmares	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
● Demanding to be fed by parent instead of feeding self	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
● Changes in toilet habits	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
● Increased anger (such as temper tantrums and hitting)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
● Clinging to adults or security objects	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

### **What you can do to help**

- Give love and affection
- Provide verbal assurance (both parents say "I love you")
- Maintain consistency of people and routines
- Reassure the children they will be cared for
- Provide a clear and simple explanation of changes
- Allow the children to express feelings through words or play
- Avoid angry expressions or emotional outbursts in front of the children
- Avoid fighting in front of the children

<sup>5</sup> Problem checklists for Infants and Toddlers taken with permission from Judicial Council of California (2014)

## PRESCHOOLERS (3-5 years)

Preschoolers most often react to their parents' breakup with fear and guilt. They are confused. Young children are not able to understand what is going on and why. They think that if dad can leave their life, mom can too. They may think that if parents can stop loving each other, they can also stop loving the children. Young children often worry about who will take care of them. They worry if there will be enough food or money, about a house to live in, and so on. Even babies in the first six months of life react with fear and stress when parents show anger. There really is no age where children are not upset by stress in a bad relationship.

Parents will often see children go back to earlier behaviors as they attempt to cope with their fears. For example, children may:

- Want a security blanket they had previously given up.
- Have problems using the toilet after they have been toilet trained.
- Cry, cling, or disobey.
- Have night fears or fears at separation. Separation fear can also happen with babysitters or at preschool.
- Imagine strange things about why one parent is gone.
- Have problems at play and they may fight more.
- Think they caused the breakup. They may think dad or mom would not have left if they had behaved better.
- Hide their own feelings if a parent is very upset, afraid that they will upset the parent.

### WHAT TO DO

- Tell young children clearly and often that their parents will take care of them, and that mom and dad both still love them.
- Tell them they are still a family, no matter where each family member lives.
- Explain in a simple way why the breakup happened. If possible, this should be done before it happens.
- Help the children know that the problems are between mom and dad, and that the breakup is not their fault.
- Give children a chance to talk about their fears. Each parent should frequently set aside time to talk to the children about how they feel.
- If possible, don't lie or provide false hope – when children find out the truth, it can damage trust between parent and children.
- Both parents should spend lots of time with their children.
- Avoid conflict in front of the children. Young children will listen to their parents' arguing and may think that they are to blame.
- When violence has occurred, the safety of the children must be ensured. A previously violent parent can help repair the harm by setting a good example of anger control. Showing respect for the other parent can undo the damage to children who have seen violence.

For children under three years of age, one-week of being away is too long. Their sense of time is much longer than that of older children. Ideally, infants should have contact with both parents every day. But it can be very difficult for children to spend a lot of time with a parent they are not bonded to. In that case, briefer contacts are best. These contacts can be made longer as the bonding between the parent and children grows, and as the children grow older.

## YOUNG SCHOOL AGE CHILDREN (6-8 years)

Children 6-8 years old respond most often with grief. They express their grief through crying and sobbing. They also feel a deep yearning for the absent parent. The parent who is missing is usually the father. The children will miss that parent intensely, even if their relationship with the parent was not good before the breakup. Anger felt toward the absent parent usually will not be expressed, since they don't see him or her as often.

Their anger will be toward the parent that is present because they spend more time with that parent. They may blame that parent for the absence of the other parent. When contact with the absent parent is limited, children at this age often believe that the parent has stopped loving them. This reaction causes emotional trauma.

Young children often hope mom and dad will get back together and believe this will happen someday. They may feel that it is their job to take care of the parents in spite of their own emotional needs. Many children try to solve problems between parents. They will try to comfort them. It is not proper for children to reverse roles and act like parents. Early signs that your children look and act "fine" can be misleading. Emotional problems related to breakups often appear much later.

Research tells us that children are negatively affected when they see their parents fighting. It affects their ideas about how people solve problems with each other. When parents continue to fight, children become aggressive toward other children. Children do not get used to the fighting. Instead, the fighting wears them down. Physical fighting is especially damaging. Children will copy their parents and hit other children.

Many young children carry a serious burden when parents breakup. There can be a "tug of war" on their emotions, especially when parents try to get children to take sides. Some parents may tell their children that the other parent is bad; that the other parent caused the problems. Each parent may really believe this simple view, but it is probably not correct. Children caught in the middle are the most likely to lose this war.

### WHAT TO DO

All children need protection from their parents' hurt and anger.

- Avoid pressure on the children to take sides.
- Never criticize the other parent in front of the children.
- Reassure children that both parents still love them, and they will be taken care of even if mom and dad do not live together.
- Enable children to spend time with the absent parent.
- Let children know it is okay to love the absent parent.
- Encourage older children to spend quality one-on-one time with each parent. They need this time as much as young children do. Most of them are very sad that they cannot spend more time with their non-residential parent.
- Young children are not sure if their parents still love them, so they need more love and support along the way.



## CHECKLIST FOR YOUNG SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN (6-8 YEARS) <sup>6</sup>

### Issues

- Longing for absent parent
- Dreaming about parents getting back together
- Feeling the need to take the side of one parent
- Concern about parent's well-being
- Guilt that they are responsible for the separation

### What to watch for

- Sadness, grief, crying, sobbing, withdrawal
- Fear of losing relationship with parent
- Fear of losing order in their lives
- Feelings of being deprived or left out
- Anger and increased aggression
- Difficulty playing and having fun

### Problem

### No Problem

### What you can do to help

- Assure them with words that their parents will continue to take care of them
- Assure them they will continue to see both parents (if this is the case)
- Give the children permission to love the other parent
- Don't criticize the other parent in front of the children
- Don't put the children in the middle



## **OLDER SCHOOL AGE CHILDREN (9-12 years old)**

Children in this group are more advanced in their thinking. Their response to a breakup is not the same as younger children. Preteens have developed new thinking skills that allow them to understand cause-and-effect relationships. But they still lack a larger view of how things work. They are able to see different points of view. Most of these children can understand the reasons for the breakup.

On the outside, these children will bravely try to make the best of it. However, on the inside they often hide the distress they are feeling. They may say they see their non-residential parent enough even though they don't believe it. They may say they don't feel rejected when in fact they do. In part they may deny their true feelings to avoid the residential parent's anger. In other words, they may hear one parent expressing anger with the other parent and want to avoid upsetting this parent more than they already are. Children are then afraid to ask for more time with the other parent.

Many children at this age will take sides in the parent battle. They most often side with the one they spend most of their time with. They are better able to see both sides than their younger siblings, but they still tend to see things in black and white terms ("right/wrong" instead of understanding the big picture). This results in a need to label one parent as "the good guy" and the other parent as the "villain." This may be because they still fear that they will be left or abandoned. They do not want to upset the parent who is their primary caregiver.

Children at this age may try to undo the breakup. Perhaps it is in part because they have no control in the matter that they are likely to feel intense anger. Unlike their younger siblings, they are very aware of their anger. Anger is normal in the breakup of a family. Another part of it is because children get mixed messages from how the parents behave. The children are punished for bad behavior. Then the parents act in bad or selfish ways themselves, without punishment (at least this is how children may see it).

This is an age where children are trying to establish their identity, a sense of who they are – and this process often gets disrupted during a family breakup. Children may also develop health complaints or problems (including infections, headaches, stomach aches, asthma, etc.). The stress the children are going through makes these problems worse. Doctors say that children from split homes come to their clinics far more often than other children.

Family breakups also lead to problems with peers. Children may not have as many friends as before or fear that their peers will reject them. These children are more likely to become friends with other rejected classmates who may have emotional and behavior problems, which can lead to more serious problems such as failing in school or breaking laws. Or they may engage in risky sex, or drug and alcohol abuse.

Children in this age group often believe they have more power than their younger siblings, or more than they really have. They believe they can control their own lives and the lives of their parents. They are likely to feel very let down and a sense of loss too big to deal with. They may "act out" by trying to hurt one or both of their parents, by saying mean or unkind things. They may accuse parents of changing for the worse, or acting in immoral ways. They may refuse to spend time with the parent they now see as wrong, bad, or guilty.

This abuse of power by the preteen should not be accepted. In a gentle way the child should be made aware that they do not have the power they think they have. For example, they cannot refuse to have a relationship with one of their parents (unless, of course, there is abuse involved). They should be expected to be civil and polite to both parents. At the same time, they should be assured that they still control their own feelings. Concrete examples may help. Remind them that even though Aunt Mary is bossy or Grandma is strict, they must still go on family visits; and they are expected to be polite. Even though they may not like a certain teacher, they should still show respect. They must continue to go to school and do their work.

They can, however, be given some control over minor aspects of their time with the other parent. For example, they could choose to bring a friend along, suggest activities to the other parent, call the other parent now and then, etc.

## WHAT TO DO

- Talk often with children at this age. They need to talk about the breakup and life after the breakup.
- Let children talk to each parent, and allow them to express their concerns, fears, and complaints. Listen with an open mind and don't criticize children for the way they feel.
- They can understand a little about how the parents feel. It is okay to say that mom and dad do not agree about everything.
- Do tell them that mom and dad do agree about the children. Parents should work very hard to make those agreements happen. They should offer love and support to their children, and be a hero for the children.

Acknowledge children's anger. Both parents need to try to change things that upset them. Often, the children are most upset about the breakup itself. They yearn for the parents to get back together. If this is not going to happen, children should be told, clearly and with no doubt. Creating false hopes does not help children.

Parents' anger toward each other must be controlled. If their anger becomes violent, parents must separate and avoid contact until they learn control. Parents should minimize conflict in front of their children. Children learn social skills by watching conflicts get resolved. If parents can negotiate and compromise, good social skills are learned. This can lessen the effect of the conflict. Parents must allow the children to love the other parent. Encourage children to call or write letters. Help the children give the other parent gifts on special days (birthdays, Christmas, Father's Day, etc.)

It also helps to say good things about the other parent in front of the children. Praise that person's good qualities. In spite of your anger and sadness, at one time you saw some good qualities. You saw enough good to want to marry or move in with this person. Surely some of those qualities are still there. It is important that your children feel proud of both their parents. Avoid making children "choose sides." Most parents are not aware how often they do this. Trying to get children to side with you damages their relationship with the other parent. It leads to more stress and causes anger toward both parents.

Inform the children's doctors and teachers about changes to the family so that they can offer support from another source.

## CHECKLIST FOR OLDER SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN (9-12 YEARS OLD)<sup>7</sup>

### Issues

- May see things as black and white: one parent is right, the other is wrong
- May feel shame or embarrassment about parents' separation
- May feel the separation threatens their own identity
- May feel need to overcome a sense of powerlessness
- May feel loyalty conflicts

### What to watch for

	Problem	No Problem
● Physical complaints (headache, fatigue, stomach ache)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
● Intense anger, especially at parent they see as to blame	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
● Taking one parent's side against the other	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
● Difficulty with peers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
● Difficulty playing and having fun	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

### **What you can do to help**

- Listen to child's feelings and complaints without taking sides or judging
- Don't criticize the other parent to the child
- Encourage the child to see good in the other parent
- Avoid fighting in front of the child
- Say positive things about the other parent
- Don't pressure the child to take sides or make the child feel like they have to take sides
- Support the child's contact with the other parent (if this is possible and safe to do so)



### **ADOLESCENTS/TEENAGERS (13-18 years)**

Teenagers have an edge over younger children. They have more advanced thinking skills. They also have a larger social group, so they will have more support to deal with the family breakup. Their main social outlet is the peer group, not the family. As a result, parents may not notice that their adolescents have problems. This is unfortunate and the problems may worsen without attention.

Parent conflict affects teenage boys and girls differently than young children. Girls report more angry feelings. Boys report more sad feelings. Such feelings may reduce parents' influence over their children. The adolescent probably will rely more and more on peers or he or she may become socially isolated.

Loss of a relationship with a parent causes problems for a teenager. This major source of help and direction is lost at the worst time. Breakups cause personal and social stress. Losing the support of a parent at this age can cause continuing problems. For many teens, inconsistent discipline and lack of parental controls is upsetting. This is a time when teens begin to experiment with special relationships themselves. There may be an absence of healthy role models by the parents. Teens may be hurt by the bad examples set by their parents, or they may turn to poor role models seen in movies or on television. They may follow their peer group, which is much stronger when parents are not around or involved.

A family with only one parent has many needs and teenagers are forced to grow up more quickly. They may handle more family responsibility. For example, some teenagers must help with younger siblings, or may have to care for an unstable parent. A third of them will become more active in family life, but another third will withdraw from the family.

Many teens will act out their anger or frustration and engage in harmful behavior. This is due largely to their brains not being fully developed, which doesn't happen until around 25 years of age. They may hang out with peers who break laws, or drink or take drugs. Teens may also take risks with sexual behavior (especially girls). This is a stormy period of growing up. The lack of care by two parents will make matters worse. The guidance that adolescents need is not there. Problem behavior is more likely if the parents split before children are 10 years old. Careful control and communication by both parents can reduce problems and lower the chance of bad behavior.

Some teens do respond in a mature way. They vow to do better than their parents, but many will have concerns about their own current or future romantic relationships.

- They often worry about sex and marriage well into adulthood.
- They may marry early just to get away from home, especially when there is high conflict. Or, they may be looking for someone to love them.
- They have more breakups than normal. In part, this is because of quick decisions to marry.
- They often make poor choices for partners, especially if they have had no model of how to settle conflict and keep trying in a relationship.

Adolescents have thinking skills that allow them to see how systems work (such as families, laws, governments, and other groups). Young teenagers still view these systems in a simple and idealistic way, so you will see them react with anger or outrage when things don't work "right" (or the way they expect them to – without understanding the big picture).

Young adolescents often feel the opposite of preteens, for example, they

- Sometimes feel anger over their lack of power and control.
- Are more likely to feel helpless in their situation.
- May be upset, thinking that no one respects their opinions or feelings or loss of security.
- May think that no one cares (not the parents, the court, or "the system").
- May feel that parents expect too much of them.
- Will often be dramatic and display moral anger.

As their thinking skills grow, they can start to sort out their views of parents. They can begin to understand that we are all a mix of good and bad qualities. We all have traits to admire and we all have flaws. Thus, they should be able to develop a new viewpoint of each parent. They can see them as individuals with qualities that can be admired and traits they don't like. That is just a fact of life. You, as a parent, can learn to accept your children's views and anger. You can still guide their beliefs about the causes of the problems.

## **WHAT TO DO**

Most parents need to improve their parenting skills. This is true even if a marriage is solid. The preteen and teenage years present risks and challenges that can escalate. Family breakups increase those risks. Teens resist parental control. They demand freedom and want to make their own decisions. Many single parents are tempted to let go of control in order to reduce the conflict. This often happens because the other parent is not there to give support; to help when the residential parent needs a break. They are not available to help think through a problem. Lack of supervision is the best predictor of problems for children. Parents need to learn and practice skills to be involved with their children's adjustment. They can do this by focusing on:

- Learning to supervise without causing too much conflict.
- Improving communication skills. You must do more than just listen well. You need to also give feedback.
- Learning to effectively discipline. This requires patience and fairness. It will require you to be consistent and work together with your teen.
- How to solve problems with family meetings.
- Learning to make agreements with teenagers for appropriate behavior. This means making expectations clear (in writing) and setting consequences – together with the teen.
- Encouraging the teen to ask questions. They should be given honest and clear answers.
- Letting children talk about their concerns with the other parent. They should be encouraged to ask questions to the other parent. In this way, teens will feel less pressure to "choose sides." They can begin to understand that each parent sees things differently. They will see that there may be "truth" to both sides.

## Importance of honest communication

By this age children can realize there are two sides to every story. Most of the time they will be able to handle the lack of certain facts. If the parents are honest it will help rebuild the trust of their children. This is very important. Teens know when a person is not honest or is trying to manipulate. They see double standards that young children do not see. Parents who are not open and honest run a real risk of losing the respect of their teens. Parents need to learn skills to communicate well and listen to their children in an active way. They should learn to talk about their own feelings without blaming the teen (these are called "I" statements). For example, when a child is upset and criticizes you, you can say, "I feel hurt when you say those things." Do not say, "You're being a mouthy brat. You sound just like your mother (or father). Go to your room."

## Where can parents learn these skills?

Parents can learn important skills for dealing with teens through an internet-based program called Parenting Wisely (**see [www.parentingwisely.com](http://www.parentingwisely.com)**). In this program, parents can view videos demonstrating each skill. Then they view how these skills are used in everyday life. They can select from several choices to solve challenges with teen behavior and see what the results of those different choices are likely to be. A little learning (3-4 hours) goes a long way. It can improve the parent-teen relationship and reduce the risk of behavior problems.

## Don't expect teens to be your counselor or emotional support

We know teenagers can take on bigger duties in the family, especially if there are younger children involved. But in spite of the temptation to do so, parents must refrain from asking teenagers to do too much. They must not rely on their children for emotional support. Some teens do a good job of helping a depressed and insecure parent, but this is a major burden for children, even teenagers. They may not be able to deal with their own emotions and stress. Parents need support to cope with their own emotions, but that is the role for close adult friends. They can also seek help from a mental health counselor or religious leader. It's too much for children to feel that they must make their parent healthy and happy. It can be crippling to their growth. This is a time when they should be busy exploring their own lives.

## CHECKLIST FOR ADOLESCENTS/TEENAGERS <sup>8</sup>

### Issues

- Upset that parents may be unable to provide needed support and limits
- Already difficult relationship with parent may worsen
- Premature or increased independence
- May be asked to assume more responsibilities at home that pull them away from peers

### What to watch for

	Problem	No Problem
● School problems, such as difficulty concentrating, fatigue	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
● Acting out emotional distress through sex, drugs, crime	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
● Internalizing emotional distress: depression	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
● Anxiety over close relationships	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
● Grief over loss of family and childhood	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
● Becoming distant and aloof from family	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

<sup>8</sup> This section adapted with permission from Judicial Council of California (2014)

### **What you can you do to help**

- Provide opportunities for teens to share feelings, concerns, complaints without judging them
- Avoid relying on teens for emotional support
- Remember you are the parent and they are the child
- Don't pressure teens to choose sides
- Say positive things about the other parent
- Allow teens to have appropriate friendship and peer activities

## **SCHOOL EFFECTS**

Research shows there are harmful effects in school for children whose parents have split up. Preschool children may enter school less ready as compared to other children. Their ability to learn is not as developed. Older children often find it hard to pay attention and concentrate. Their grades may suffer. Many children have behavior problems (especially boys). Problems learning can lower children's self-esteem. Often, their social skills are not well-developed. Social problems cause more feelings of low self-worth. These issues add to the stress they already feel over the breakup.

### **WHAT TO DO**

- Tell teachers and school counselors of a family breakup right away, and in advance if possible. This helps teachers give support as children try to adjust.
- Communicate with teachers on a regular basis. Parents and teachers can work together and support each other, which will help children with learning and social tasks.
- Ask about a separation or divorce support group at school, or suggest starting one.
- Show extra interest in school activities. Get the children to talk about school events often.
- Ask that two copies of announcements be sent home, and share those with the non-residential parent. Be sure both parents are told of important school events.
- Be sure that you both attend these events as often as possible.
- Give school/teachers the address and phone numbers of both parents. If parents get along, consider going to school conferences together. If not, take turns.

***Tell teachers and counselors what is happening.  
Details are not needed or proper.***

***Be sure both parents stay active in school events, meetings, etc.***

***Be sure both parents get copies of records, grades, etc.***

***Attend functions together if possible.***

## **WORKSHEET: Focusing on my child<sup>9</sup>**

You may wish to use this worksheet after you have completed the previous checklists (Problem/No Problem) in this section. If you have identified problems, you can get help from the resources we mention throughout this booklet.

1. How well is my child handling the issues that are listed for their age group?

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2. If my child could change one thing about the situation (apart from getting me back with my former partner), what would it be?

---

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3. I have identified the following possible problem areas as a priority to start on:

a. \_\_\_\_\_

b. \_\_\_\_\_

c. \_\_\_\_\_

4. I plan to help my child with these problems by:

---

---

5. If I need more help to deal with these problems, I will ask for help from:

a. \_\_\_\_\_

b. \_\_\_\_\_

c. \_\_\_\_\_

d. \_\_\_\_\_

Contract with myself:

I will review this worksheet in \_\_\_\_\_ weeks/months and make a note of what I have done to deal with problems I have identified.

<sup>9</sup> This section adapted with permission from Judicial Council of California (2014)

## 2 SINGLE PARENTING

### NEW SOURCES OF STRESS

Many parents who have just split up are often relieved. They may be glad to be out of an unhappy (and sometimes abusive) relationship. Being a single parent brings new sources of stress, which may include:

- Loss of income and need to work (if the parent used to stay home).
- Increased need for day care.
- Less time with the children which leads to less supervision and guidance.
- Having to act as both mother and father (loss of an ally to help think through problems, offer support, and provide discipline – if that was available before).
- Chaos and disorganization (due to less time and more stress).
- Few breaks or “time outs” from parenting.
- Less involvement in social and community life.
- Dealing with children’s reactions to a new romantic partner or stepparent (and possibly their children).
- Less obedient children.
- Inconsistent discipline between parents.
- More general behavior problems to deal with.
- Cycles of power between children and parent, where each tries to exert more control.

When stress is high, parents may become grouchy and too strict. Many dads tend to be too permissive at first. Both parents pay less attention. They make fewer demands for good behavior. They tend to communicate less and show less affection. They are not consistent with discipline and are less in control. The task for the parent at home is to establish authority and control in a reasonable, fair, and consistent manner. This is especially hard if the absent parent was very involved with the children.

The stresses of being a single parent are real. They can lead to depression or anger in many parents. This, in turn, has serious effects on children. Sometimes the parent does not adjust well mentally. Half of all abuse in America today happens in single parent homes. Against common belief, the abuse is most often done by mothers and/or their new partners (new partners are not bonded to the children and may easily become angry with them).

#### **WHAT TO DO**

Success as a single parent is somewhat dependent on support from the other parent.

*Parents should try hard to:*

- agree on child rearing.
- set aside your own problems in front of the children.
- set aside arguments and anger as much as possible so they can calmly talk about matters related to the child.
- be consistent so that expectations and routines (bedtimes, meals, rules, etc.) are similar in both homes.
- not fight in front of the children. It leads to confused feelings. Children will see the other parent as the victim, and often become angry with the accuser. Save outbursts of anger for close friends or a counselor!
- not criticize the children’s bonds with the other parent. Children need to feel good about both parents.

## ***HIRING BABYSITTERS VS. CO-PARENTING***

Residential parents need to have a break from full-time childcare. The residential parent's relations with the children often improve after their "batteries are recharged." Many parents are frustrated when a babysitter is needed. Often, a parent hires a stranger or asks a friend or relative rather than asking the other parent to watch the children. Residential parents should make more use of non-residential parents for the children's care. They should insist that the other parent spend more time with the children. More time with the absent parent is often good for the children (assuming the absent parent is dependable and mentally stable in their behavior toward the children).

Watching the children gives the absent parent a greater role, and will become more and more natural. Child support payments, school expenses, and "extras" are much more likely when the non-residential parent sees the children often. When parents work together, there is less pressure on both of them, and there is less stress in the home.

## ***GETTING HELP***

Mental health experts can help with depression and anger issues. Family therapists can be a great help to parents and provide skills in communication and managing children. If money is a problem, your health insurance may help. You can also call a local mental health center which offers many low cost services. You can find them in your community by searching on the internet or in a phone book for "Psychologists," "Professional Counselors," or "Clinical Social Workers."

## ***PARENT EDUCATION CLASSES CAN HELP***

They cost little. Such classes teach skills in how to manage children and how to communicate better. Parents must be able to commit six to twelve weeks to attend in-person classes.

Another option is online parent training. This takes less time and is not expensive. This method has also proven to get good results. Parents can learn at home or at work when it is convenient (see [www.parentingwisely.com](http://www.parentingwisely.com)).

It is best if both parents participate in the therapy, counseling or parent education. A professional may be able to help get an absent parent more involved.

## ***DISCIPLINE AND SUPERVISION***

Sometimes parents are new at discipline. They should avoid negative methods - yelling or making threats. These are not effective ways to get the children to obey. At first children will feel hurt by such negative methods. However, they will soon begin to yell and push back.

Power struggles will become more common. There are better methods! Parents can learn to talk and reason with their children, and to be clear on what they expect. "Logical" consequences should follow when the children disobey.

Supervision is often a problem for single parents. Parental control that is not consistent will cause conflicts. These issues can lead to delinquent acts. It is important to talk with your children. Talk about what they are doing in school. Have them check in at regular times, and check in on them. Good supervision is hard for single parents. They have to take care of so many other things and they have no partner to lend a hand.

*Set aside marital issues.*

*Calmly discuss parenting issues.*

*It is essential to be consistent in both homes.*

*Avoid “putting down” the other parent.*

*Use the other parent for childcare rather than paying babysitters.*

*When you need a break, send the kids to the other parent.*

*Get help for your depression or anger.*

*Find someone to listen to your needs and frustrations.*

*There will be many.*

*Take a parenting class. There is a lot you can learn.*



## 3 NON-RESIDENTIAL PARENTING

Rejection by the children affects many parents. Low self-esteem and lack of a clear role affects the “long distance” (non-residential) parent. If the physical distance between parents and children is significant, some parents stop seeing their children.

There may be a need for family therapy. Therapy can help re-establish regular contact. As we repeat throughout this manual, regular contact with both parents is very important. Cost and distance may not allow frequent (e.g., daily or weekly) visits with the non-residential parent. So when the child can visit with that parent, longer visits can help (such as during holidays or summer breaks). While more frequent visits would be ideal, more time with the non-residential parent when they do visit is still better than nothing. It will help children stay connected to the non-residential parent and provide a break for the residential parent.

### WHAT TO DO

To help maintain a connection with the children, non-residential parents can

- Make regular calls and if available, use an online interactive video call program (i.e., Skype, Face Time, etc.). Schedule times in advance if possible so the children know to expect them.
- Write letters, or send emails and texts to the children.
- Send recordings of the absent parent telling a story to children.
- Play games with children over the Internet.
- Talk about a movie or television show both have seen.

***Stay involved. Don't give up!***

***Get creative about how to maintain contact.***

***Read some books on what to do.***

***Sign up for an online parenting program  
(see [www.parentingwisely.com](http://www.parentingwisely.com)).***

***Join a support group.***

A parent's lack of confidence can contribute to loss of contact with the children. But confidence-boosting skills can be learned with a little effort, and they will quickly improve with practice. The parent should consider

- Attending parenting classes.
- Watching a video on parenting.
- Reading a self-help book on parenting. A good book is *101 Ways to be a Long Distance Super Dad*. It is full of creative ideas that work.
- Including an adult, same-sex friend when they are with their children. A friend with experience can be a coach for the parent. Friends can set an example. They can help the other parent become more confident.
- More great ideas for parents separated from their children on the web at [www.daads.com](http://www.daads.com).

# 4 PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS AFTER DIVORCE AND SEPARATION

Why non-residential parents might have little or no contact with children:

- The residential parent has discouraged or destroyed the child's bond with the absent parent.
- The non-residential parent thinks it is too emotionally difficult.
- The access location is unnatural for the non-residential parent (for example, required in a public place).
- The residential parent won't allow access.
- The residential parent has moved far away.
- The children have been abandoned by the absent parent.

## PROBLEMS CAUSED BY FATHER'S ABSENCE

Children need to be involved with their father in meaningful ways; more than just visiting for weekends and vacations. They need to know that they will see their fathers on a regular basis. Time together should be predictable and under the most natural "parenting" conditions possible. Contact should be expected. Children can accept an absent parent if they know when they will see them again.

The impact of infrequent or no contact with a parent can devastate children. There are many reasons:

- Most children deeply miss their fathers. Young children often mourn the loss of their father as if he was dead. In fact, lack of contact due to a father's death causes fewer problems than for children of a breakup.
- Worry that he will replace or forget about them.
- Ongoing grief about the loss of their father. This grief lasts well after the parents' own grief has been resolved. Sustained grief can cause damage to the hippocampus part of the brain, which affects children's memory. This, in turn, may affect their learning in school and at home.
- Boys need their fathers to help develop their identity. They need to be with a male parent to learn about male interests, activities, skills, and social behaviors.
- Boys need an older male authority figure. They need his approval and interest.
- Both boys and girls need exposure to a father for his love, guidance, and discipline.
- Children without a father often do not do as well in school. They get more criticism from teachers for their behavior.
- Girls tend to be more flirtatious with boys and men when they have not grown up with a father. They tend to be more sexually promiscuous and marry or cohabit earlier.
- Boys and girls may have higher levels of worry and anxiety. They have poor concepts of self.
- Delinquency rates are higher.
- Boys show impaired moral development.

Children deprived of their natural fathers, compared to children in two-parent families, are:

1. eight times more likely to go to prison
2. five times more likely to commit suicide
3. 20 times more likely to have behavioral problems
4. 20 times more likely to become rapists
5. 32 times more likely to run away
6. 10 times more likely to abuse chemical substances
7. 9 times more likely to drop out of high school
8. 33 times more likely to be seriously abused
9. 73 times more likely to be fatally abused
10. and have a 44 percent higher mortality rate

– Richard A Warshak, *American Journal of Family Therapy*, 2000

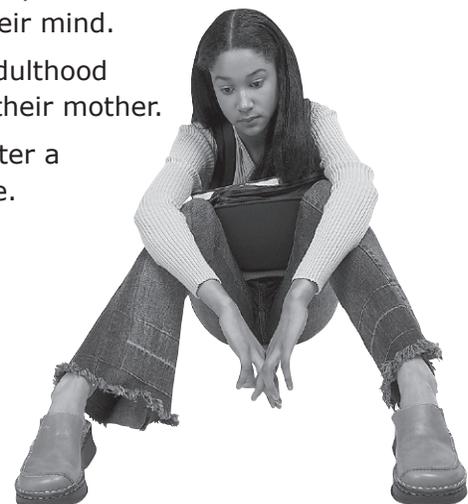
There are many risks and costs when one parent drops out. It affects both the families and society. It is important to try and prevent this tragedy. Many separated parents want no contact with the other parent. When they avoid their children to accomplish this, there are risks that parents may not realize. It is not unusual for children to be reluctant to see their father. Many of them side with their mothers. A father often feels shaken by the loss of his family. He is vulnerable. It is very hard for him if there is initial rejection by his children. This rejection will fade in time, and disappear if dad continues having regular positive contact. The children will then trust the father's love and that love will be returned.

## PROBLEMS CAUSED BY MOTHER'S ABSENCE

A mother's absence is less common, however, it can devastate children just as much as a father's absence.

- Children will likely have emotional and learning problems.
- Girls lose their main role model, resulting in problems developing their identity.
- Fathers are limited in their ability to understand their daughters.
- Boys also suffer, as mothers can help them develop emotionally (help them with their learning about and managing their feelings).
- Mothers may play a major role in helping to prevent violent behavior in teenage boys.
- Children's self-esteem is damaged when they are rejected by their mother. This is true whether the rejection is real or perceived in their mind.
- Social relationships may be negatively affected well into adulthood as children lose the opportunity to learn social skills from their mother.

The relationship between parents and children will change after a breakup. It will move along a scale going from positive to negative.



## Grading Children's Relationships with Parents after the Breakup or Separation

- "A" ● Positive relationship with both parents.
- "B" ● Preference for one parent.
- "C" ● Allied with one parent.
- "D" ● Estranged from one (or both) parent(s).
- "F" ● Alienated from one or both parents.

Below are descriptions of various types of parent-child relationships. They are arranged in order of most desired to least desired.

**Positive relationship with both parents.** This is the best possible situation. Children have a healthy, positive connection with both parents. Most children of split homes are in this group. The children value both parents. They want to spend lots of time with both.

**Preference for one parent.** This is also at the healthy end of the scale. These children have a strong bond with one parent. They also wish to spend time with the other parent. They may prefer one parent because of gender or personalities. Of course, this can change over time. Preferences will change as the children develop new interests and activities.

**Allied children.** The allied child forms an even stronger bond with one parent, and prefers to limit contact with the other parent. This most likely occurred during the marriage and continues after the marriage ends. Children may have chosen one parent over the other during conflicts. Or maybe an older child made a moral judgment about the parent's behavior. Children may decide that one parent needs their time and attention more.

**Estranged children.** This child has emotionally detached from one parent (or from both). This may be due to parental violence, abuse or neglect. Major flaws in parenting can lead to estrangement, for example, a parent might be immature and self-centered which can lead to chronic emotional abuse. There may be physical abuse. The parent may be angry, rigid, and too restrictive. There may also be substance abuse or a mental disorder.

**Alienated children.** This child is at the least desired end of the range. These boys and girls strongly reject a parent, without guilt or doubt. They want no contact with that parent. In this case, the reason is exaggerated by the child's distorted view of the parent. The parent being rejected is often competent and caring, but the misperception may have developed during the breakup.

There may have been extreme conflict between mom and dad. One parent could give the child a distorted view of the situation and pressure the child to side with that parent. Then the child blames the other parent for all the family problems. One parent may create situations to support this distorted view ("setups" such as making sure the other parent disappoints the child through no fault of their own).

## 5 NEW RELATIONSHIPS

When families separate, parents often get a new partner. This sometimes happens quickly. In some cases, different people may come home at night with mom or dad. In other cases, one or both parents will marry again.

New relationships can confuse and upset children. Most children see their parents as special, as people they can count on, who take care of and protect the children. They teach their children how to live. When a break up occurs, mom or dad stops loving the other parent and starts loving a new person. Children need their parents' help most during this period of stress and turmoil.

When a parent begins a new romantic relationship, children may feel the parent has turned against them. If the new person is a stranger to the children, the children may feel betrayed or rejected, and that they must fight for their parent's attention. They may feel deserted or unloved, especially if they see the parent show affection for this new person. Younger children are often very jealous and resentful. An adolescent may react with anger and outrage. They may also feel anxious and embarrassed.

When a parent becomes sexually active, many adolescents will start having sex. This happens most often with girls. They become active at an earlier age or have sex more often than their peers. Adolescents may worry about their own security in future relationships. They worry more than is normal at their age.

### **REMARRIAGE or LIVE-IN PARTNERS**

With an absent (or non-residential) parent, children may feel a sense of relief if that parent remarries or has a live-in partner. But this brings new challenges also. When it's clear that the parents will never get back together, it can cause intense resentment. Loyalty to the 'real' parent may be strengthened, and they may be suspicious of a new stepparent or live-in partner. A new marriage or relationship may strain relations with the absent parent, and may cause a decline in contact with the children.

In the children's home, stepfathers often try to take on the role of man of the house. Children often react with, "You're not my daddy!" But lack of involvement or attention by the stepparent also leads to problems. These problems are most intense and long-lasting for adolescents. Stepfathers and stepdaughters have the most problems. Young children are better at accepting a stepparent, but this may take several years.

Stepmothers have a lot of power over the father. Men who are left by their first wives are eager to please the next woman they become attached to. If she has children, fathers will often treat her children better than his own, which can hurt his own children. Some stepmothers become very involved with his children, trying to replace the mother and compete with her. Many friendly and cooperative divorces change when one parent remarries. The new stepmom often does not like the father to have contact with the mother. She may try to insert herself into the co-parental relationship, which can cause more conflict between the mom and dad. Their children suffer when this happens.

It can take five years or more to adjust to a new family. Older children, parents and step-parents all struggle. The risk to stepfamilies is huge. One-fourth will break up in the first two years. Breakup rates are much higher than for first marriages. Also, abuse is much higher in stepfamilies, including physical and sexual abuse. In some cases, consider delaying remarriage until after the children have entered adulthood, or are no longer living in the same home.

## WHAT TO DO

A single parent is entitled to a social life. They deserve a new partner or special person. But when there are children in the home, adults must be more mindful. It is important to

- understand the children's needs.
- pay attention to what makes them anxious.
- proceed slowly. Try to wait a year before introducing a new partner.
- give children time to adjust after introducing a new partner. Let them get to know this person in casual circumstances. It takes time for trust to form. Let them develop a friendship. You may think the new partner is wonderful. Don't expect the children to feel the same, especially early on.
- warn your new partner. The kids may reject him/her at first.
- not include the new partner in all the children's activities.
- continue to have regular time alone with your children.
- prepare the children in advance when guests are spending the night.
- save casual 'dates' for nights when the kids are with the other parent.
- talk to the kids a lot before remarriage. Prepare them. Let them react. Do not criticize their reaction.
- alert new partners that the role of the other parent will continue.
- watch for excessive punishment or abuse by the new partner.

Prepare if you decide to remarry or re-couple. Discuss everything with the children, regardless of their age. They need to express their concerns (and hopes). This helps parents and stepparents move forward. They can be sensitive to the children's needs. Encourage the children to help plan the event. They can play a role in it if they are okay with the idea.

Step-parents should expect rejection at first. Research shows that few step-parents are prepared for the adjustment to a new family. It can be hard to build a relationship with new children in their lives. They must allow for resistance and suspicion. Things will get better in time, but it may take several years. Older children have a harder time accepting a step-parent. It may never happen. Adolescents may continue to be loyal to the other parent and to the original family. These feelings will block their acceptance of the step-parent.

Step-parents are often critical toward the children, especially after the glow of courtship wears off. Relationships can become tense. Be prepared. You may need some help through these tough times. The birth parents will still be doing most of the nurturing and discipline. They may not get the help and support they hoped for from the new step-parent.

Step-parents should take the role of social coach and not discipline the children early on. However, spouses need to work as a team, and the new partner can eventually learn to support appropriate discipline. They should first spend a lot of time forming a good bond with the children. Don't try to replace the natural parent. Don't make the children call you mom or dad, or make them hug or kiss you. Encourage the children to have regular contact with their birth parent. When the stepmom wants to get involved with mom, dad may need to be firm to protect his co-parental relationship. He should lead the communications and be the one to talk to mom instead of letting his new wife or partner do it.

Counseling and classes for step-families can help with all this adjustment – a lot. A step-parent and the former spouse (the children's birth parent) need to keep a business-like relationship. This will help prevent the new partner from becoming too jealous.

## STEP-SIBLINGS

Life gets more complicated if there are new step-siblings, however, getting new step-siblings is not always a bad experience. Many children may view the step-siblings as the best part of the new marriage -- they have more playmates and someone closer to their own age for support.

Parents need to be aware of some of the challenges they may face. Confusion and resentment about mom or dad's new partner may increase. The new family may suddenly double in size.

Other children who are total strangers come into the family. They may be there all the time, or when the non-residential parent has the children. Children from both families often must share rooms. They must share the parent's time. Families that merge will have different lifestyles and habits. The parents may expect different things from the children. It is a major challenge to create new house rules that meet everyone's needs. There may need to be family meetings for many months.

*Have family meetings before merging two families.*

*First do it separately, then all together. It may take a few meetings.*

*Be patient.*

*It is very difficult to blend families. Nearly all have problems.*

*Don't hesitate to seek professional help.*

*Be cautious of living with a new partner without marriage.*

### WHAT TO DO

- Talk to the children about changes in living arrangements. This is important!
- Family meetings can be quite helpful, and are often best done in the presence of a counselor or therapist.
- First, each family should meet separately. Then meet with the "blended" family.
- Let everyone express their views. Usually, the parents will make final decisions, but children should feel they were listened to. They need to feel that they had a part in decisions. Each child should have input.
- Be prepared for difficult moments. There may be emotional displays. Be patient, use lots of assurance, and be very clear about expectations. Everyone should see the agreements as fair.

A family therapist can help you with realistic expectations. They can suggest new ways to handle the family structure and create realistic goals. Each person can talk about what they expect in a safer, neutral environment. This helps clarify roles and responsibilities for all family members. Communication will improve with good coaching. Most families have problems adjusting, so this is a normal process.

Your local bookstore will have many good self-help books. There are also helpful support groups for stepfamilies.



## **THE CHALLENGES OF LIVING TOGETHER RATHER THAN MARRYING A NEW PARTNER**

In recent years, more couples have chosen to live together and don't want to commit to marriage. Many of them are adult children of divorce. The number of unmarried parents is growing fast. The risks for their children are greater than for those with married parents.

Unions of couples who live together are briefer than marriages. Only one in six will last three years. And only one in ten lasts more than five years. Parents who do not marry are less committed to each other (and people who avoid commitment tend to attract each other). Unmarried couples tend to have more conflict and domestic violence, and are more likely to have affairs. Alcohol abuse is higher with cohabitating couples and the family income is often lower.

The end of these relationships causes many problems. The children's relationship with the non-residential parent may suffer. Sometimes courts don't want to give an unmarried, absent parent rights to see the children. If the parent's income is low, they are less likely to press for their legal rights. Some unmarried parents of very young children have not had the time to develop a strong bond, so they may be less willing and able to push for access to their children.

For children's adjustment and parents' well-being, there are advantages to being married. There is lots of evidence proving that marriage benefits most people. Married couples have better health and a longer life. They usually have a higher standard of living. After a breakup, adults rarely find that "the grass is greener" with another person.

## 6 WHAT HELPS CHILDREN'S ADJUSTMENT?

Clearly, all breakups do not lead to poor development or abuse of children. Not all children are over-stressed. Some children seem to thrive, and others do fairly well. But, as noted earlier, some have a very difficult time. What makes the difference? Improving the quality of parenting through sensitivity, active involvement, and effective discipline.

### TO PROTECT CHILDREN FROM CONFLICT

Parents in conflict are poor role models, are not consistent with discipline, and are not attentive. This creates stress for their children. Negative emotions between partners are carried over into their interactions with their children. After the conflict, parents are suffering, too. Involvement with their children decreases and they cannot respond to their emotional needs. There are several things parents can do to reduce conflict and the harmful effects of long-term conflict. Some solutions require the aid of others, including the court. A "parenting coordinator" can help work out a plan and lower conflict when the conflict is high.

#### REMOVE THE CAUSE

Obviously, this is the best course of action. It may require counseling or therapy. Parents need to examine their own role in feeding conflict. Possibly there is nothing you can do to end the conflict, so you need to structure your life to decrease it. When your children interact with the other parent, minimize exposure to anger. Fighting and playing mind games should be avoided. Children copy their parents' behavior. They can become aggressive and show poor control of emotions if they see their parents doing the same thing.

A powerful book will help you look at conflict very differently. It gives helpful tips for reducing conflict and improving your happiness. For instance, we become angry when we are afraid and feeling vulnerable. Anger give us a temporary feeling of being powerful. *The Good Karma Divorce* by Judge Michele Lowrance will help you understand conflict and suggest ways to control it ([thegoodkarmadivorce.com](http://thegoodkarmadivorce.com)).

#### LEARN NEW SKILLS

Often, just going to a class will motivate parents. While it may feel uncomfortable at first, parents can meet other couples or divorced parents who are going through very similar challenges. This can be a source of good ideas and social support. They can learn about the harmful effects of conflict. Hopefully, they will want to change, but to change, they must learn new skills. They must learn how to communicate without causing anger; to listen to what is being said without judging. Parents need to work together and cooperate for the children's sake. Books or videos about divorce and parenting can also help (watching videos about parenting is more helpful than reading or listening to lectures). Parenting skills classes are offered in many communities.

#### KEEP CHILDREN OUT OF THE MIDDLE

Parents need to keep their children out of their disputes. Being caught in the middle between mom and dad is very stressful for children. The most powerful reason for children to be maladjusted is conflict between the parents. It is not the breakup itself - it is the conflict that goes on before, during, and after the breakup that most causes stress and suffering in children.

## *Children Should Not.....*

- *be expected carry messages between angry parents.*
- *hear you “trash” or “put down” their other parent.*
- *be asked to confront the other parent about money issues.*
- *be quizzed about the other parent’s private life.*
- *be burdened with parents’ emotional needs and weaknesses.*
- *be forced to choose which parent attends special events.  
(In most cases both should attend.)*
- *be threatened to not have access to the other parent.*

### **MANAGE YOUR EMOTIONS**

Many parents go through regular cycles of emotion. They go from conflict to detachment. When they cooperate, they have hope, until the conflict returns. There is sometimes an intense longing for a loved one who has separated. Anger, frustration, resentment, and rage come and go. Other powerful feelings cycle from intense to mild, including being sad, lonely, depressed, and despairing.

These feelings of love, anger, and sadness have unique effects. When one of these is strong, the parent may not be aware of the other two. Some parents get “stuck” in one of these three feelings. This may be how they cope with loss. Parents stuck in anger may endlessly seek revenge. Those stuck in love may continue to hope to reconcile. Parents stuck in sadness may be depressed. They may blame themselves for all of the problems of the marriage. Many parents use alcohol or drugs to deal with their stress, which can become a dangerous habit. Helpful explanations of how the brain is involved with these strong feelings and what you can do to manage them are in the *Children in Between Online* program ([online.divorce-education.com](http://online.divorce-education.com)). Parents can also learn to better manage their emotions through counseling, therapy, or classes. If this is an issue for you, strongly consider getting some professional help – it will help you cope better in the long run, and help your children and future romantic relationships.

Parents need to learn to use language that is not violent. People respond well when given a positive message (a request to do something). They will not respond well when given a negative message (a demand not to do something). *Nonviolent Communication*, by Marshall Rosenberg, explains this approach ([www.cnvc.org](http://www.cnvc.org)). Learning communication skills helps parents react less emotionally. Then they can make a choice about what skills to use in tense situations.

Over the years, most couples separate emotionally more and more. Parent conflict decreases. This detachment and lower conflict helps the children. High conflict is usually temporary, so it may not be necessary to decrease the children’s access to the absent parent. It is more harmful for children to lose a relationship with one parent than it is for them to be exposed to conflict for a short period of time. Decreasing contact between the absent parent and the children is risky. It can lead to complete loss of contact over time. Children never get over the loss of a parent relationship, even as adults.

## CHILDREN AS A CAUSE OF CONFLICT

Sometimes, children can make the conflict between parents worse. If children have serious behavior problems or emotional problems, it adds to the burdens of the parents. If parents have trouble handling these issues, conflicts can arise or be aggravated.

Of course, the children's problems may be caused by the breakup or by the parents' conflict. It is often difficult to know just what is causing what. A therapist or counselor can help sort this out. The best solution is for the parents to agree on how to deal with the children's problems. They need to be fairly consistent across households and they should support each other in front of the children.

## AVOID LOYALTY CONFLICTS

Loyalty conflicts are when children feel pressure to choose sides. They are the most damaging aspect of parent conflict. Most parents do not think they put their children in the middle of their conflict, but children say that they do. Some parents share their hatred of their former partner with their children. They may imagine the children are not loyal and may criticize them for this. Some act hurt when the children want to be with the other parent. Often the pressure not to love the other parent is subtle. Children may not be allowed to talk about the other parent or to bring things back from the other house. Children may be quizzed about time spent with the other parent, or about the other parent's personal life.

Children will try several ways to resolve loyalty conflicts. They try to achieve balance by having a separate but equal connection with each parent. Children may:

- act as go-betweens, carrying messages and trying to get the parents to be nice to each other;
- act out (misbehave) to draw attention from the parents' conflict;
- get sick - either from the stress or as a way to take attention away from the parental conflict;
- hope their parents might get back together out of worry or concern;
- become angels with extra good behavior or achievements - to give their parents a source of common pride;
- retreat from both parents;
- turn to their peers; and/or
- find comfort in alcohol, drugs, or risky sex.

Being caught in the middle is too great a burden for most children. The Center for Divorce Education's *Children in Between* online program has helped many parents with these very issues ([online.divorce-education.com/](http://online.divorce-education.com/)). Parents can learn to reduce the frequency and intensity of conflict. Loyalty conflicts are also reduced. Children can learn to speak up when caught in the middle of parent conflicts.



## ***FIGHTING CONSTRUCTIVELY***

It is not always possible to avoid conflict, but conflict can be controlled. Controlled conflict often leads to positive, constructive changes. We strongly recommend that parents learn to compromise. Parents can view videos to learn parenting skills and how to manage conflict. They become more effective parents and see their children's behavior improve. Video programs such as Parenting Wisely ([www.parentingwisely.com](http://www.parentingwisely.com)) has been very effective. There is also a good problem solving approach that includes several considerations described in *Children in Between Online*:

- Let out only part of your anger.
- Don't heap one stored up frustration on another.
- Strong hostility toward the other will be returned by the other.
- Don't hold all your anger in. It will come out in other ways that children notice. Instead, learn to tell the person what you are angry about in a direct, but respectful way.
- To minimize overreactions, use "I" messages and ask for a change. For example, some times the other parent is late bringing the children home. You might say, "I feel worried and angry when you don't call if you are going to be late because I don't think you care about our agreements. I'd appreciate if you could plan ahead or call me if it can't be avoided."
- Avoid name-calling and blame. Instead, say what you want or need.
- Apologize if you are wrong, or compromise so the anger subsides.

Children benefit from seeing or hearing about how the conflict was resolved through talking. This will help to erase the negative effects of the conflict, and they will learn to do the same in their own lives.

## **CHILDREN'S CONTACT WITH THE ABSENT PARENT**

"Reasonable access" may be two weekends per month, but most children are dissatisfied with this arrangement. It is a huge decrease from daily contact. Younger children will be most upset by the separation. Frequent contact with the absent parent is very important (unless this parent has been abusive to the children). Children do not "get over" a lack of contact with the absent loving parent. They eventually stop talking about difficult feelings like being deserted, rejection, or other pain. Parents may assume that a few visits (or even no visits!) are enough for the children.

## ***PLAN CONTACTS AND BE ON TIME***

They should not be last minute. This benefits both children and parents. Parents need respect for their privacy and a breakup demands new boundaries. The parent in the home needs a break and the children benefit if that parent has some rest and recreation. Sometimes the absent parent is late in picking up the children. The children strongly resent the delay. They feel it more than the parent does. This is very true for young children. The absent parent should stick to the schedule. This is important as it helps the children maintain a sense of trust and that they can depend on the parent. It also shows respect for the residential parent's plans.

## ***FREQUENT ACCESS***

Young children have a different sense of time (they see short periods as longer than we adults do). Visits with the absent parent can be short but frequent. This is much better than long, infrequent visits. Show them a calendar. Let them see the schedule for future visits. This will help young children manage the absence.

## ***AVOID BEING TOO LENIENT OR GENEROUS***

Absent parents may entertain children too much. This creates unrealistic expectations for the long term. Often parents may become overly permissive. This is an attempt to regain close bonds with their children. Non-residential parents do not like to set limits. They want to avoid conflict, but a lack of limits can be problematic. It can lead to less responsible behavior on the part of the children. Children need down time, structure, and reasonable limits. They need to have a normal life with both parents. This is important, even if time is restricted.

- Try to follow the children's normal routines.
- Follow normal chore duties.
- Expect the children to be responsible.
- Maintain normal activities.
- Expect routine homework.

## **MINIMIZING CHANGE OF ENVIRONMENT**

### ***LIFE CHANGES***

A family breakup results in many life changes. The changes children will go through are a major cause of stress for them. These include the loss of a parent and maybe loss of siblings.

They may also

- move to a new home, state, or country.
- start a new school.
- have to make new friends.
- start in a new religious institution (church, synagogue, etc.).
- deal with parents' dates.
- have to adjust to new step-parents or step-siblings if mom or dad remarry.
- lose access to grandparents and other relatives.
- have to deal with mom or dad starting a new job or going back to school.

The more stress children are exposed to, the greater the chance they will develop problems. They may start using alcohol and drugs. Serious emotional problems may develop. The more life changes, the more sources of stress there are. Children can benefit from resources and skills to deal with so much stress.

### ***NEW PARTNERS***

Many divorced and separated parents quickly get involved again to deal with their own pain and loss. This rarely solves the problems of the former relationship. Those same problems often come up again after the courtship phase ends. Parents may quickly become serious in their new relationship and decide to marry or live with the new partner, which causes more stress on the children. It is a big change for them. Issues of divided loyalties come up. The children are torn between the new person and their other parent. It is best for both the parent and children to wait a year before parents get serious with a new partner. Healthy adjustment takes time; waiting helps the parent and children adjust to all the new changes in life.

## ***MOVING AND ACCESS***

The residential parent may want to flee painful memories. They want to get away from reminders of the other parent and leave the community. Moving often causes children intense stress. Some parents think it will help to get the children away from the other parent, especially if the other parent is not considered a "good parent." Some think that by moving away they will shelter the children. They may think there will be harmful effects from "bouncing back and forth" for visits.

Most children benefit from seeing both parents as much as possible. It makes up for the problems of going between two homes and can help with inconsistency between the two homes. Most problems are between the parents. Sometimes they can't be solved in a friendly way and sometimes legal remedies are not possible or they don't work. Parents may have to swallow their pride, put their own desires aside, and allow the children access to the other parent.

Both parents should avoid moving far from the other. Moving far apart makes it difficult to frequently see the children. Sometimes it may not even be possible, and then the absent parent should keep in contact with frequent letters, postcards and phone calls. They can use email and social media like Facebook. The children can visit for holidays and vacations.

## ***SUPERVISED ACCESS***

Sometimes a parent has serious problems. The child may be in danger of physical or emotional harm. If so, legal remedies are available. Supervised access can be set up. Moving away should be a last resort.

## **SUBSTITUTE PARENTS**

Sometimes, a non-residential parent may show little interest in the children and may even leave the family. If so, a "substitute" (surrogate) parent can often help. Boys benefit most from substitute parents. A parent substitute might be a grandfather, grandmother, uncle, aunt, stepfather or stepmother. It could even be some other adult. The best parent substitutes are the same gender as the children, and will stay in frequent contact with them.

Often, the maternal grandmother offers a lot of support, sometimes provides childcare, and gives childrearing advice. At times, choices must be considered. Should the family move to get a grandparent's support? Or should access to the non-residential parent come first? Most often, the children have a greater need for access to their other parent.



## IMPORTANCE OF GOOD PARENTING SKILLS

The quality of parenting is critical for *both parents*. Children's problems will be worse if a parent can't cope and deal with the family breakup in a proper way.

### *SUPPORT AND DISCIPLINE*

*Authoritative* parenting is best for children (*not authoritarian* parenting, which is rigid and harsh). Authoritative parents have clear, high expectations for their children, but at the same time are nurturing and respectful toward them. They tend to be good listeners, but maintain their strong (but reasonable) standards for behavior on the part of their children. Authoritative parents care for, support, and pay attention to the children. They are confident and consistent with discipline.<sup>10</sup>

Family breakups and separations cause a disruption in children's lives. Children need their parents' full attention more than ever, and to have clear expectations and guidance. These are reinforced through consistent, predictable discipline. Children's behavior problems can be improved, especially with changes in the parents' support and discipline. Family therapy and parenting classes are a good option for dealing with problems. Parental warmth (closeness, acceptance, support, responsiveness, and encouragement) can offset parental conflict.

*Parenting Wisely* is an online parenting education program that teaches effective skills. It has a video format and includes a lot of tip sheets and online quizzes to test your knowledge. The results are significant, with dramatic improvement in children's behavior.<sup>11</sup>

## DIVORCE EDUCATION

The costs of family breakups to society and individuals are being recognized more and more. Personal and legal conflicts can continue for years. Many courts have begun divorce and separation education programs for parents (and sometimes for children). The goals of such programs are to help parents understand the problems the breakup cause for the children. They teach ways to minimize stress for both the parent and children. They teach parents to cooperate, communicate, and calmly make decisions. These programs help parents review their own parenting skills and motivate them to improve their parenting and not undermine the other parent.

By the end of 2014 over a thousand services were using the Center for Divorce Education's (CDE) Children in Between program for divorce education, including mental health clinics, dispute resolution centers, schools, therapists, physicians, and others. Find out more about this program at [www.divorce-education.com](http://www.divorce-education.com) or contact them at 877-874-1365 or [staff@divorce-education.com](mailto:staff@divorce-education.com).

<sup>10</sup> For more in-depth understanding of the authoritative parenting style, go to <http://www.parentingscience.com/authoritative-parenting-style.html>

<sup>11</sup> For more information about Parenting Wisely or to sign up for this program, go to [www.parentingwisely.com](http://www.parentingwisely.com), or contact **Family Works, Inc.** at 866-234-9473 or [staff@familyworksinc.com](mailto:staff@familyworksinc.com).

# 7 PARENTING PLANS

## (AGREEMENTS ABOUT LIVING ARRANGEMENTS)

Many judges require parents to develop a parenting plan before granting a divorce. It helps to lay out specific dates and times when each is in charge of the children. Because everything is in writing, there is less need for parents to negotiate. Although this is rigid, adherence to the plan will increase trust between the parents and support cooperation.

### Types of Parenting Plans

Joan Kelly, a well-known expert in this field, observed that “It is not the divorce per se, but the conditions and agreements the parents create during and after the divorce that will determine the child’s adjustment.” The marriage is over. Your lives as mom and dad parenting under the same roof are gone. You will begin new lives as parents living apart, but the goal is still to parent together.

A *Parenting Plan* (or the “rules” or “guidelines” for post-divorce living arrangements) is often part of the legal agreement that is developed in the process of separation or divorce. There are three basic types of living arrangements (“parenting plans”) for children. The most common is called **sole custody**. In this case, one parent becomes the residential parent. The other has “reasonable access.” About 60% of all parenting plans result in the mom being the residential parent.

About 10-20% have the dad acting as residential parent. The remaining 20-30% are divided between the “split” and “shared” parenting plans. In **split parenting plans**, one or more children goes to each parent. This is rare in initial separation decrees and usually happens when there are unusual circumstances. It may occur when children are old enough to choose which parent he or she wishes to live with.

Many people believe it is a bad idea to separate siblings, but there isn’t enough good research to know for sure. It likely depends on the specific circumstances. In **shared parenting** (or “co-parenting”), both parents share legal control of the children. Shared decision making does not necessarily mean equal time with each parent. With shared residences, the children may live with each parent half of the time or primarily with one parent. The parent with whom the children live most is usually called the “primary residential parent.” The other is usually called the “secondary residential parent.” Some parents make it easier on the children by letting them stay in the family home as the parents change - one parent moves out when it is the other parent’s turn to be with the children.

Shared parenting plans vary widely across states. In most states it is presumed that shared parenting is the best plan for children and is usually required except in special cases. Judges must provide a strong reason if some other arrangement is ordered. In some states, judges have the authority to order shared parenting. They can do this if they believe it would be best for the children or if one parent requests it. In some states judges can order it even if neither parent requests it. Most other states will permit shared parenting if both parents agree.

Experts generally agree about the following guidelines.

#### **Shared parenting is appropriate for parents who:**

- are child-oriented.
- commit to active parenting of their children together.
- can set their marital problems apart from their roles as parents.
- will put their children’s needs ahead of their own.
- have the ability to communicate and cooperate.
- are willing to work out differences in parenting styles.

- will change the parenting plan as needed.
- value the bond between the children and the other parent, despite their anger or disappointments over the failed relationship.
- can accept the other parent's (and the children's) point of view.

### **Shared parenting is discouraged when:**

- a parent has intense hostility, or anger is out of control.
- conflict is frequent and bitter.
- a parent wishes to punish or take revenge on the other parent.
- there is a history of family violence or child abuse.
- there is a history of substance abuse by either or both parents.
- parents are unable to make joint decisions about parenting.
- a family has a history of being very disorganized.
- parents are unable to separate their own needs from those of their children.
- geographic distances, work schedules, or other logistics make shared parenting impractical.

When it is possible, shared parenting benefits both children and parents. It is a sharp contrast to the problems of having only one residential parent.

### **Advantages of Shared Parenting**

- Children in shared parenting have two psychological parents and maintain regular contact with both.
- They get a clear message that both parents love and want them.
- They feel important to their family.
- They have psychological permission to love and be with both parents. Very few are confused by having two households and two sets of rules. Most need easy access to both mom and dad.
- There is reduced conflict in shared parenting families and going back to court is reduced by 50%. A parenting plan that minimizes conflict should have highest priority.
- In shared parenting, children's self-esteem tends to stay high, even with parent conflict. However, continued conflict in shared parenting can be just as harmful as conflict in cases involving one residential parent.
- In a recent study of support payments, about half of the sole residential parents received child support payments regularly. Of those who shared parenting, none had to return to court.
- Shared parenting provides advantages for childcare if the parents can rely on each other for substitute care.
- Those who share parenting are less likely to "burn out" from the demands of raising children alone.

### **Disadvantages of Shared Parenting**

- Persistent, high levels of conflict cause harm to children. If it cannot be brought under control, then shared parenting may not be a good idea.
- Shared parenting may limit a parent's ability to relocate. Parents who are serious about co-parenting must make personal sacrifices and decide which living situation is best for the children.
- It may bother anxious children to go back and forth between homes.

- Many parents separate when the children are infants or toddlers, or may have never lived together. In this case, shared parenting may not be the best plan.
- One parent may have little experience in parenting and not have good parenting skills.
- When parents have not been able to cooperate, they often do “parallel parenting.” This means that each parent makes decisions about the children with little discussion with the other parent. If this continues for more than a year, the children often get put in the middle, especially when there is a lot of inconsistency between parenting styles and methods. In this case, it may be better for one parent to be the primary residential parent to avoid this stress on the children.

## *Guiding Questions for Parenting Plans*

**You should think about several important issues as you design your parenting plan.**

- ▶ What goals for your children do you both share?
- ▶ How will you continue to be effective parents in separate households?
- ▶ Do you only want to solve your legal matters, or also your family issues?
- ▶ How do you want your children to look back on this time and on your behavior as parents?

**You and the other parent need to spend time talking, and consider the following:**

- ▶ Discuss what goals you have for your children.
- ▶ Talk about what their childhood should be like.
- ▶ Discuss what you want them to be like both as children and adults.
- ▶ Talk about how you each can contribute to these goals and vision for their future.
- ▶ Write your ideas down on paper and share them with your children. Then they will know that you both care about them. They will see that you are working together for their welfare.
- ▶ Set an example of cooperation. Do this even though it may be a heroic effort.
- ▶ Plan how to coordinate your efforts. Parenting is difficult under the most ideal circumstances and is more of a challenge when done from two households.
- ▶ Plan for the big issues (like school, religion, etc.), and for the small, day-to-day stuff (such as transportation, parties, etc.).
- ▶ Set up regular meetings, emails, or phone calls to catch up with each other on important developments. You can work out schedules and discuss concerns.

Your parenting plan will spell out conditions and terms. Some of them can be legally enforced, but hopefully you will focus on your new family structure. Take the time to design a good plan that is healthy and flexible. Someday your children will judge how well you both handled this difficult time. More importantly, as young adults they will look back on their childhood and at how you cooperated. They'll remember if you put their interests ahead of your “marital issues.”



## **Frequency of Contact with Each Parent**

The amount of time children should spend with each parent is one of the most fought-over issues in a family breakup. It is also the most misunderstood by all involved, including parents, lawyers, and judges. As a result, parenting plans are often flawed, which can cause a great deal of emotional suffering for children.

Throughout this booklet, we have discussed the importance of maximizing the time that children of divorce spend with both parents when possible. Remember that young children need more frequent swaps between parents, rather than fewer, which provides continuity and comfort from each parent. This goes against what many people assume is "common sense." Parents, lawyers, and judges misunderstand this fact. Quality of contact is more important than quantity, but there must be enough quantity. Fathers are more likely to drop out of children's lives. At first, court orders may restrict the father's access to a young children, which can cause a decline in contact with the father over time.

The ideal situation for young children is daily interaction with both parents. There are many meaningful types of interactions. Some are "functional," including meals and bedtime routines. They involve limit setting, discipline, and play. After age 2, most children can tolerate two back-to-back overnights with one parent. Avoid long separations lasting 5-12 days. Frequent contact means more transitions from one house to the other, which many people assume is bad. They assume that frequent transitions will upset children, and should be avoided. Research suggests this is not necessarily true; even young children will get used to frequent transitions if they are not too stressful. They already handle this well in "normal" families (for example, attending daily day care), and they can also do well in "broken" families (moving from parent to parent and back again). A rigid stress on stability (one-home, one-bed) for children is still too common in many courts, which can be detrimental to children's other needs. Most children need strong and meaningful relationships with both parents, and can adapt quickly to having two homes.

## **Flexibility Over Time Is Essential**

### **Parenting plans need to be specific**

This way, everyone is clear about what will happen and when, which will reduce conflict and misunderstandings.

### **But be prepared to make changes in the long run**

Situations and people change over time. For most families, anger diminishes over time. Parents usually remarry or re-couple. Stepchildren enter the picture. Your children will age and mature. Their interests will change. The need for parent input in their lives will also change. Therefore, a parenting plan should not be carved into stone. Be prepared to modify it over time. You can sometimes anticipate future changes, which may be built into the original court decree. However, few of us are able to predict the future so be prepared to work with the other parent to make changes when necessary.

The best way to do this is by mutual agreement, written by both of you. Each parent should be given a copy. If you cannot do this, work with a mediator or other third party. Put into your plan that you both agree to mediation before taking court action. If necessary, you can have your local court enter a decree with the changes you have agreed to.

## How is a Parenting Plan Decided?

Judges are required to make final parenting plan decisions based on the best interests of the children. This is true in all states, however, each state has different laws. In most states, judges expect parents to prepare and agree on a plan prior to coming to court. Some attorneys practice “collaborative law” where they help parents avoid contested divorces or separations. They use mediation rather than court hearings to resolve conflict. They will not represent the parents if one parent wants a judge to settle their conflict or if one party does not operate in good faith.

Judges will sometimes listen to the advice of experts such as clinical psychologists. These experts interview all persons involved (including the children). They may use various tests to help them get a clearer picture of the family situation. Thorough evaluations may include home visits where real parenting behaviors can be observed. The use of such experts by both sides is very expensive and can increase conflict.

More and more, **parenting coordinators** are used to help high conflict parents form parenting plans. If parents agree on the plan, judges usually grant their wishes, including shared parenting. But if they do not agree, the judge may award residence to one parent. Sometimes the judge will split residences in which different children may go to different parents.

## *Things to Include in a Parenting Plan*

### Begin with a general statement, including

- how the parents feel about their situation and the children’s welfare.
- what goals the parents agree on for the children.
- the parents’ agreement to work together to raise their children as best they can.

### Details of the living arrangements

- How much time will be spent with each parent?
- Who will do the transporting back and forth?
- What time will exchanges be made?
- Parents and children can create month-long calendars together. These can be posted in an obvious place (on the refrigerator). The calendar will show whose home the child will be in each day. It should include the time for exchanges.

### Transportation plan

- Often depends on availability and work schedules.
- Might involve relatives or new partners.
- Works best when the parent who is to have the children next picks them up.
- If conflict levels are high, neutral exchange sites can be arranged (in other words, not at the parent’s house – at school, a friend’s house, or another public place).
- If parents live far apart, costs for travel should be planned.

### Daycare plans for working parents

### Plans for holiday visits

- Take into account family preferences, for example, some families prefer Christmas Eve, others Christmas Day.
- Consider alternating holidays each year (Christmas one year with one parent, Thanksgiving with the other).

- Each parent should have the children for half of the holidays each year.
- Specify times of exchange. For example, in even-number years, dad has them from 6 p.m. Christmas Eve until noon on Christmas Day. In odd-number years, the schedule is reversed.

### **Decision-making about and access to the children**

- In shared parenting, both parents have legal rights to make routine or emergency decisions, including medical care, mental health needs, or other issues.
- Both parents should receive school and activity notices, and have access to school and medical records.
- Be sure that everyone who needs special permissions to help with the children has them, including:
  - Step-parents, relatives, friends, etc.
  - Emergency medical releases, as needed.
  - Written permission to pick up children at school or to transport children to various events.

### **Religious matters**

If relevant, spell out your agreement about what religious activities are acceptable for the children’s participation.

### **Participation in special activities**

Such as regularly scheduled annual events (family reunions, birthday, etc.).

### **Future college plans (including setting aside money)**

### **Meetings such as parent-teacher conferences**

- Will parents attend together?
- Will they go separately, or alternate?

### **Issues around travel with children**

- Choosing travel periods and alerting the other parent.
- Requests for travel time should be made well in advance so both parents can make plans.
- When travel occurs, the other parent should have an itinerary.
- Locations and phone numbers should be listed in case of an emergency.
- Plans for phone calls and emails to stay in touch.

### **Child support**

- The court typically makes decisions about child support.
- Parents can recommend to the court what they think would be appropriate, including who would cover unusual items or events.
- Specify who will provide health insurance.

### **The role of other relatives**

- Children’s bond with relatives is important but often overlooked. Children usually benefit from continued contact with both families. The affection of family and friends helps children, and such connections should be protected and encouraged. This should be covered in the parenting plan.
- Will there just be access to the residential parent’s family?
- What about the other grandparents? Children often have a deep bond with both sets of grandparents, and grandparents may be very attached to the children. When parents

split up, this bond is affected. The children feel “divorced” from the grandparents, too. Many states grant access rights to grandparents, which may be requested by them.

- What about aunts, uncles, and cousins?
- Relatives need to be careful not to criticize a parent or pressure children to reject a parent. The relatives should try to focus on maintaining their own relationships with the children and stay out of conflicts between the parents.
- If there are ongoing problems with relatives’ behavior, a family therapist, counselor, or other professional may be able to help by educating the adults to do what is best for the children.

## Potential Effects of Sole Residence Parenting Plans

Many mothers and fathers want to be the residential parent, often because they think it will be easier or less complicated. They may wish to have little contact with the other parent or to have total control over the children’s upbringing. Some see it as a sign of victory over the other parent. Some prefer it because it gives them more freedom (for example, to relocate).

There are situations when it is best to choose one parent as the residential parent. Sometimes it’s unavoidable, as when some parents disappear, do not want to be involved, are abusive, or are otherwise simply not good parents. In all other cases, children should be involved with both parents, as we have discussed before. Having only one residential parent works against this concept.

Having one residential parent causes a power imbalance between the parents. One person has all control over the children. Prior to the breakup, such power was shared. This power difference can be abused and raise the level of conflict between the parents. The children are aware of this power imbalance and the view of the weaker parent may be damaged. This can affect the quality of their relationship with that parent and limit the parent’s effectiveness in many ways.

Bitter residential parents often deny access of the other parent to the children. They may make visits uncomfortable or difficult. This can destroy the children’s bond with the absent parent. The non-residential parent may attempt to regain some power by spoiling the children, frequently criticizing the residential parent, or trying to gain the children’s sympathy.

Most non-residential parents see their children as often as they are allowed. But others tend to decrease their contact over time. Often it is too emotional for them. Brief and infrequent visits can make them feel like they don’t have a meaningful parenting role. Sometimes the relationship between the parent and children has deteriorated.

In sole residential custody arrangements, support payments are often a problem. The nonresidential parent might withhold child support payments as a way to “punish” the residential parent. Some non-residential parents can’t afford to pay the amount ordered.



## **Worksheet: PARENTING PLAN<sup>12</sup>**

This parenting plan worksheet can help you and the other parent spell out the details of how you are going to parent. If you and the other parent develop a parenting plan, each of you should keep a copy. You do not have to fill all of this form out if it doesn't apply or you aren't sure yet of how you would like to answer the questions. If you are meeting with a mediator, child custody recommending counselor, or lawyer, this can provide you with some ideas to discuss in greater detail with that person. When filling this out, think about your family's routines, traditions, schedules, and any significant cultural, community, or religious practices that might be important to you or the other parent. It can be helpful to you and your children to make plans with such traditions or routines in mind.

Use the blank spaces below to write your responses. Or better yet, consider copying these into your computer. Then you can type your responses and once finished, you'll be able to print or save the document to your computer. If you save them to your computer, you can make changes to them over time.

### **1. Parenting goals**

- a. \_\_\_\_\_
- b. \_\_\_\_\_
- c. \_\_\_\_\_
- d. \_\_\_\_\_
- e. \_\_\_\_\_

### **2. Communication ground rules**

- a. \_\_\_\_\_
- b. \_\_\_\_\_
- c. \_\_\_\_\_
- d. \_\_\_\_\_
- e. \_\_\_\_\_

<sup>12</sup> This worksheet adapted with permission from Judicial Council of California (2014)

### 3. Time-sharing arrangements (list all options)

a. Monthly schedule \_\_\_\_\_

b. Vacation times \_\_\_\_\_

c. Holidays \_\_\_\_\_

d. Special days (birthdays, parents' birthdays) \_\_\_\_\_

e. Special occasions (weddings, funerals, graduations) \_\_\_\_\_

f. School sports, church and community events:  
(parent-teacher conferences, school programs, sports events, church programs)

g. Grandparent time-sharing arrangements \_\_\_\_\_

### 4. Transportation details

a. Transportation responsibilities, exchange times and places \_\_\_\_\_

b. Special instructions or restrictions \_\_\_\_\_

### 5. Staying in touch

a. When children are with you, do you want to specify whether the other parent should call only at a certain time or whether the child should contact the other parent as he or she wishes?

b. When children are with the other parent, would you like to have a set time you call the child or would you like to keep this flexible?

---

## 6. Procedures for making decisions

a. How should major decisions be made and by whom: (education, day care, medical and dental, therapy)? \_\_\_\_\_

---

b. How will disagreements be resolved? \_\_\_\_\_

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## 7. Procedures for sharing information

a. School-related information (report cards, academic or disciplinary problems, parent-teacher conferences, school activities)

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b. Extracurricular activities \_\_\_\_\_

c. Health-related information (illnesses, prescriptions, checkups, therapy sessions, other)

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d. Community and special events \_\_\_\_\_

## 8. Agenda for a parenting meeting (on a monthly or weekly basis)

a. \_\_\_\_\_

b. \_\_\_\_\_

c. \_\_\_\_\_

d. \_\_\_\_\_

# 8 SOLUTIONS: WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

**We have seen that family breakups put many serious burdens on children.**

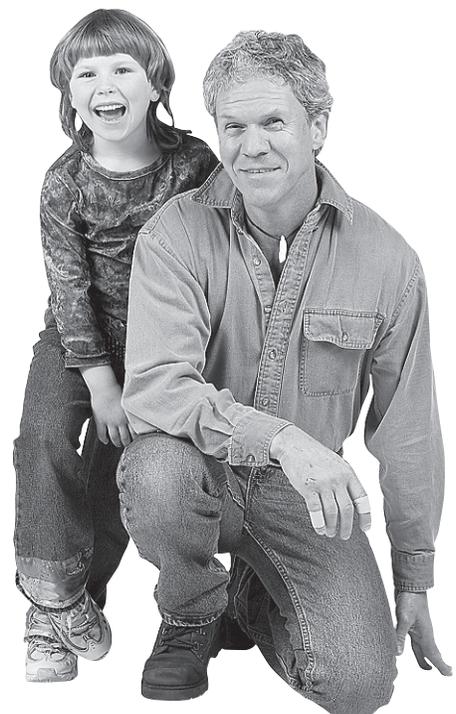
**What can be done?**

## **Become More Sensitive Parents**

Sensitivity as parents predicts children's future adjustment throughout life. Parents are often consumed by their own difficulties and are insensitive to their children's pain. Breakups and continued conflicts affect children. Parents need to be aware of this. They often put their children in the middle in unintended ways. This puts their emotional well-being and development at risk. It is common for both parents and children to grieve over the loss of family. They shift between love, anger, and sadness. Often, they grieve in different ways and different time periods. Parents may be unaware of children's confusion and other feelings. If they are aware, they may not know what to do about it.

- Pay attention to children's words and tone of voice.
- Observe voice tones that suggest defeat and loss of hope.
- Notice nonverbal signs that show they are stressed, such as sagging heads and sighs.
- Facial expressions may look very sad, or they may withdraw or cry for periods of time.
- Conflict increases children's risk for maladjustment. If necessary, parents need to keep their distance from each other, or at least keep their conflicts out of sight or earshot of the kids. They may need to communicate less often so that they can start to disengage, which can help resolve their grief or reduce their anger or bitterness. In time, this can lead to cooperation.

Future decisions of the court will be influenced by parent behavior. Judges will notice which parent is most cooperative and which is likely to insure access to the other parent. They want parents to seek help with their personal problems. Parents may need to learn new skills. As discussed many times in this booklet there are parenting classes and online parenting courses that can help. Look for professionals who are qualified, with special training such as certification in child and family problems. A judge may strongly encourage professional therapy or counseling. This is advisable in certain cases and should be ordered if parents do not cooperate in co-parenting. It is necessary if either is destroying the child's bond with the other parent.



## Maximize Access and Co-Parenting if Possible

As we have discussed elsewhere, most children want more time with their non-residential parent. Many non-resident parents would like more time with their children. Some do not. Those parents should be urged to be more involved with their children. There are many disadvantages of not being involved as we have covered in this booklet.

Some states require a shared parenting plan. If one parent strongly objects, there are other options. The primary physical residence might be with one parent, but there are ways to extend time with the absent parent:

- The parents could alternate weeks (if parents live in the same school district).
- Children could be with the non-residential parent every other weekend with weekdays added.
- There could be access during weekday afternoons or early evenings during the school year.
- Added overnight stays can be planned during school holidays or vacation times.

It's almost the same for parents of an infant as for an older child. Many assume that infants must be with their mothers, but there is no real evidence that this is necessary in all circumstances. Besides breast feeding, competent fathers can care for infants. The bond created by such care is important for both child and father and is important to the continued involvement of the father. Evening and overnight access periods are also important to allow for important social interactions and nurturing activities such as bathing and comforting. There are bedtime and morning routines that are helpful to the bonding process.

## Deal with the Legal System the Best You Can

Most judges are very careful and have made efforts to be well-informed about children's issues. They may have some special knowledge about family systems and child development. They should be aware of the effects of different parent arrangements. Others lack this preparation and training, and yet they make decisions that affect entire childhoods.

The same goes for lawyers. Parents should try to find good attorneys to represent their individual interests. Law school prepares attorneys to earn a living practicing law. They are not child psychologists and their training does not include courses in child development. Most are probably concerned about children, but their first priority is the interests of their client, who is one of the parents. They represent that parent during legal battles which can become bitter and ugly. The lawyer does not represent the children, although the court may appoint a lawyer or other professional to look out for the rights and welfare of the children (called a "guardian ad litem"). Even though they are not children and family specialists, attorneys should be sensitive to the effects of a breakup. They should understand how children are affected by parenting plans, and find ways to protect the children's interests.

Another way to protect children is to use special experts such as psychologists or psychiatrists who specialize in the emotional effects of a family breakup. They can also

- (a)** sensitize the judge or referee by pointing out separation issues that affect the children, and
- (b)** they can help devise a parenting plan that will be in the best interests of the children.

Other professional who act as "parenting coordinators" can also help with these plans.

The legal system can help with dividing property and financial support issues. However, it cannot help parents make day-to-day decisions about their children. Courts are not equipped to micro-manage families' lives, nor are they interested in doing so.

## Use Mediation

Some parents cannot agree on matters relating to their children. One solution is to seek a trained family **mediator**, a professional who helps people work out agreements. They do not represent either party in a dispute, are not judges, and do not hear evidence about who did what to whom. The mediator is a **neutral third party**; they do not find fault or make a final decision. Breakups bring up many parenting issues. The mediator will help the parents explore alternatives and help with issues of financial support and the division of property. A mediator can assist only with the parenting plan, or they can help with agreements for the entire separation.

The advantages of mediation are several:

- Mediators are specially trained to help parents come to an agreement. The process leads parents to cooperate more with less conflict. That is good for the parents and the children. Some states require mediation for all divorcing or separating parents, which has led to a reduction of contested divorces in those states.
- Such an agreement is voluntary. It will be balanced and acceptable to both parties. It must be fair to both parents. And it must meet the needs of both the children and parents.
- Mediated agreements are more likely to succeed because they are very specific. They are also more likely to be honored by the parents because they helped create them. It is the parents' agreement, not court-imposed. There is no loser, no anger, and no need for revenge. Greater commitment by the parents benefits the children. It is also to the parents' benefit because it prevents needless court battles, so the courts also benefit.
- Mediated agreements are less expensive than going to court even though parents need to pay a mediator. Both parents need to hire attorneys to review the agreement and put it in proper legal language. Parents can avoid the very high price of long and bitter court fights with this method. For unemployed parents, many courts provide free mediation.
- Mediated agreements are private. The negotiations are not part of a court record so they are not open to the public for review.

Parents should ensure that a mediator is a trained and experienced professional. Do not choose someone who just claims to do mediation. Consult the Yellow Pages, check with your local family court, your local mental health agencies, or look one up at **[www.mediate.com](http://www.mediate.com)**.

## Access Counseling, Therapy, and Educational Resources

Some children are very vulnerable. Parents can get counseling or therapy for them, which can clear up a children's mistaken beliefs. For example, children may believe they caused the breakup or that they can get the parents back together. Therapy can teach children better coping skills including asking for help and recognizing and appropriately expressing their feelings. They can learn how to change their thoughts to reduce stress.

Schools sometimes have support groups or counseling for children of breakups. Some teachers and counselors will respond with care and support and can help children when they most need it. Ask your school if they have any programs. If not, urge them to start one.

There are other programs that teach coping and communication skills, and explain common myths about breakups. One such program is *Children in Between: Children's Version* available from the Center for Divorce Education ([www.divorce-education.com](http://www.divorce-education.com)).

It can help your children to read books about family breakups. They can read about other children's experiences, then talk to you about what they've read. Librarians, counselors, and teachers can make suggestions. There are some good movies that have been made about breakups. These are usually made for parents. Watch them together with your child and discuss them afterwards. Three of the best are *Mrs. Doubtfire*, *Kramer vs. Kramer*, and *Definitely, Maybe*.

Therapy and education are not just for the children. This is a family system. Everyone should be involved in treatment, hopefully together. Parents need help to deal with the breakup. Healthy and reliable parents are very important, and they are essential for children to survive the trauma of a family breakup. Parents should try to use every source of help, for themselves *and* their children.

## Learn Better Communication Skills

As you know, conflict can arise in any number of circumstances. Often, parents are suspicious of each other. They may be angry for a long time as a result of the breakup. It is sometimes hard to keep emotions in check. Here are some tips you can try:

- To calm yourself before you begin a difficult conversation, **take a few deep breaths.**
- **“Coach” yourself to stay calm** – “It’s okay... don’t get worked up before you need to ... stay calm.”
- If you can, **rehearse your conversation** in advance. What needs to be talked about? How will you say it? Include and ask for important information. Write down what you want to say.
- **Talk about one issue or topic at a time.** Don’t try to solve every problem. You have many frustrations.
- **Avoid blaming the other parent.** Focus on the issue you want to solve.
- **Use “I” messages** to help keep the other person from getting angry. Most of us get upset when we are accused of something. We get defensive. We want to counterattack (“Oh, yeah? Well, that’s because you...!”). Talk about how you feel and focus on the facts (“When the kids come home late from visiting with you, I feel frustrated because it throws off their bedtime and makes it hard to wake them in the morning.”). When you avoid blaming language, it will help the other person listen without getting defensive. So, learn to use “I” messages. Don’t make “you” statements.

### Think about how you would feel in response to the two following comments:

- ▶ “You’re always late picking up the kids! If it happens again you won’t see them at all!”
- ▶ “I get frustrated [or worried] when you’re late picking up [or returning] the kids. Please call and let me know when you’re going to be late. We can work out a new time.”

For most of us, the first one will make us feel angry and probably want to defend ourselves. But how can we disagree with the second one? The second statement is an “I” message, which has two parts. First, you simply state how you feel in a given circumstance. Everyone has a right to his or her feelings. If you say you feel bad or worried or frustrated, the other person won’t feel responsible. Second, you make a specific request or offer a solution that is feasible and simple. The other person will feel they are being asked about the issue; that they have equal control over the outcome.

This is a very useful skill, but practice it before using it. If it helps, write out your “I” message. Maybe try it out on a friend to see how it makes him or her react. Try these communication skills when you are not angry or stressed. Practice them in easy situations first, and before long they start to feel natural. Then when you are in a stressful situation, you can use some of these skills more easily. It is not realistic to expect to be able to use brand new skills when you are angry.

## Don't use your child as a messenger between the parents

It may seem easier to have Susie or Johnnie tell the other parent “the bad news.” You know that if you do it, a nasty argument will occur. You think you are avoiding conflict. Well, you are—for yourself! The conflict is passed to your kids. Being a messenger will make them feel uncomfortable because they know it will cause anger or disappointment. They may have to stand up to the other parent’s bad reaction. And, they may have to carry a nasty message back to you! Don’t put this stress on them.

## Accept your role as a parent

Face up to your task. Be as calm and mature as you can, and practice and use the skills discussed in the paragraphs above. For more information and details about these important skills, go to [online.divorce-education.com](http://online.divorce-education.com)

## Negotiating informally with the other parent<sup>13</sup>

Sometimes, you can resolve differences with the other parent by negotiating informally. You may be able to reach a reasonable agreement that is in the best interests of the children and that you can both accept.

If you feel threatened or unsafe by the other parent, do not negotiate on your own. Talk to someone you trust about options for negotiating safely. Consult a lawyer, counselor or mediator.



<sup>13</sup> This section and the following worksheet adapted with permission from Judicial Council of California (2014)



### *Guidelines for informal negotiation*

- 1.** Before you get together, gather all your information and facts. Be clear about what child-related issues you want to discuss.
- 2.** Choose a neutral place and a time when you can talk without interruptions.
- 3.** Decide together on rules for how you will talk together respectfully. For example, you may both agree that you will not discuss who is to blame for the separation and will not interrupt each other or raise your voices.
- 4.** Speak clearly about what it is you want to negotiate. Stay focused on the topic. Try not to bring up past faults and problems.
- 5.** Ask the other person for their point of view. Listen carefully to what the other person has to say. If you don't understand, ask for more information.
- 6.** Look at solutions together and present your solutions as suggestions, rather than demands.
- 7.** Make sure both of you agree on the solution you have arrived at. Specify who will do what, when, and where. For example, if the agreement is about when the other parent will spend time with the children, you may need to have a written plan about how and where the transfer of the children will take place and what time the children will go and return.
- 8.** Determine if you need to meet again to review how the agreement is working.
- 9.** At the end of the meeting, give positive comments such as, —I feel better about this and —I'm glad we were able to work it out together.

## Worksheet:

# PRACTICING POSITIVE COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Practice your positive communication skills.

In difficult situations, you can use these skills to handle conflict responsibly.

## 1. Here are two sample conflict situations.

Compare the positive and negative responses.

### Situation #1

When the other parent has the children, they eat sweet treats and stay up far too late.

Negative response:

Tell the children that the other parent is a lousy parent.

Positive response:

Deal directly with the other parent about their behavior. In a calm voice, remind them that the children need to eat balanced meals and go to bed at their regular times. Discuss possible solutions to the problem, such as planning meals and shopping ahead.

### Situation #2

You discover the other parent has been asking your 12-year-old son for information about someone you have been dating.

Negative response:

Tell your son to get some dirt on the other parent's social life.

Positive response:

Tell your son that next time he can ask his other parent not to put him in this situation. Listen to how your son may be feeling. Speak with the other parent directly about the problem, if it is safe to do so.

## 2. Try providing positive responses to this conflict situation.

–*Maria, Joe and daughter Lee*–

Maria and Joe separated 18 months ago. They have a daughter, Lee. According to their parenting plan, Lee spends time with Joe every weekend. Yesterday, Joe brought Lee back four hours late from a weekend visit. Joe claims they were late because they got stuck in traffic on the freeway. But Lee has told Maria that they were late because Joe's new girlfriend came over and made dinner. Now Maria is on the phone at the kitchen table. Maria is crying and yelling over the phone at Joe, calling him a liar. Lee is sitting at the table, listening to her mother.

If you were Maria, how would you respond to Joe's behavior and Lee's feelings using positive communication skills?

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## 9 SOME FINAL TIPS FOR PARENTS

There are things parents can do for children to ease the change to a new family life. Here are several suggestions.

### REASSURE CHILDREN THAT THEY ARE STILL PART OF A FAMILY

When parents split, children often worry that they don't have a family anymore. Reassure them that families take many forms. Living arrangements are different in all families. Many children have parents who are divorced or separated. Your children need to know that they will always be part of a family, no matter what. Tell them their parents will always love them even if they don't live together any more.

Children often feel embarrassed in front of other kids about what has happened. Let them know that parental breakups are common. Tell them their parents' actions are not their fault. They don't have to defend their parents' choices.

### HELP CHILDREN KNOW THE TRUTHS ABOUT BREAKUP/SEPARATION

Children sometimes have wrong beliefs ("myths") about divorce or separation. You will help your children if you get rid of these myths. You do this by telling them the truth.

**Truth #1:** Children may believe that they caused your split. Children don't cause their parents to breakup. Children have limited abilities to understand other people's points of view. Reassure them that they are not the reason for the breakup.

**Truth #2:** Children cannot get their parents back together again no matter how hard they try. It's understandable that they would want their parents back together, but be very clear with your child that the breakup is final. Tell them mom and dad will have separate lives from now on. Not being truthful with them will only cause continuing problems.

**Truth #3:** It is up to the parents to take care of themselves. Most parents experience pain and anguish, and the children feel badly for them. Naturally, they want to help. Caring about others is certainly a good trait, but too many children end up taking on too many adult worries. Children should not have to take on adult responsibilities. Protect them from your personal problems. Let them be children, not your caretaker. Their job is to be your children and do things appropriate for their age.

### ENCOURAGE CHILDREN TO ASK FOR HELP

Children have feelings, worries, and problems. Let your child know that you want them to share these with you. Tell them that you won't get angry or upset if they tell you what's on their mind. From time to time, ask them how they feel about a specific thing that is going on.

You can also coach your children on how to talk to others about their problems. Who can they ask for help? Someone who they can trust, who is wise, who they admire or think highly of, or will understand them. This could be the other parent or an older brother or sister. It could be another relative. It might be a teacher (or a favorite teacher in the past). It could be a school counselor or nurse, a school leader, or a doctor. It could be a friend of the family, a religious leader, or a coach.

What should they say? A child may be embarrassed or afraid to ask for help. Tell them to be simple and honest. Teach them to **(1)** state how they feel, then **(2)** make a request. For example, they might say: "I'm feeling kind of scared (or worried, or confused). I wonder if you could help me."

## TEACH YOUR CHILDREN HOW TO CHANGE THEIR THOUGHTS AND ACTIVITIES TO MANAGE BAD FEELINGS

When your children are upset, take some time to talk to them. Ask them what has happened. Talk about how they understand the situation. Discuss how they can change their thoughts about it. They can make it into something more positive. Here's what you can do.

- Ask them to describe the situation in detail. What happened that made them upset?
- Ask them for a reason why the situation made them upset. Was another person mean to you? Was it because they were mad at you? Or you think they don't care about you? Maybe they wanted to hurt you or make you upset. Or maybe they thought you were stupid or lazy or mean.
- Ask them to think of one or two alternative, nonthreatening reasons the other person acted like they did. Maybe they were in a bad mood. Or they just were not paying attention to you. Maybe they were upset about something else and took it out on you. Or they just felt bad and weren't thinking about you. Maybe they were angry and couldn't control their temper. Help the children to consider these alternative explanations for another person's behavior.
- Last, ask them to compare how they felt while talking about the negative versus positive interpretation. They will see that thoughts affect how they feel. They can control their feelings by changing their thoughts.

It's hard to change our thoughts when something is really upsetting us. We keep thinking about why someone treated us like they did. There is something else we can do. We can change activities; do something to take our mind off the upsetting thoughts and feelings. For example, sometimes children will miss the other parent. They can read a good book, work on a project, play with a pet, or go for a walk, which will take their minds off of the troubling thoughts. Children may be upset because mom and dad are arguing. They can leave the room and call a friend, play a video game, or watch television, maybe with a sibling or a friend.

The problem is, when we're feeling very unhappy, it's hard to think of things to do. So sit down with your children and help them. Make a list of favorite activities. Hang this list in their bedroom in an obvious place. Then encourage them to check their list when they need to change their activity. It will help them feel better.

## TEACH YOUR CHILDREN TO DEAL WITH DIFFICULT FEELINGS USING "SELF-TALK"

You can help your children learn how to use self-talk to help them feel better when things aren't going well. You can also learn to do this yourself. When you feel better, your children will feel better, too. There are five simple steps in self-talk.



## **“SELF TALK”**

- 1** *Ask yourself: WHAT am I feeling?*
- 2** *Tell yourself it is okay to feel this way.*
- 3** *Ask yourself : WHY do you feel this way?*
- 4** *Make a plan to change your feelings.*
- 5** *Put your plan into action.*

### **STEP 1:**

**Ask yourself how you are feeling.** Are you feeling sad, frustrated, angry, worried, tense, confused, scared, tired, numb, or something else?

### **STEP 2:**

**Tell yourself it’s OK to feel that way.** It won’t last forever. Remember that lots of other kids have the same feelings and are learning to deal with them.

### **STEP 3:**

**Try to figure out why you are feeling the way you do.** Is it the situation you are in? For example, are you worried because your parents are arguing? Are you hurt because a parent is ignoring you? Are you angry because a parent doesn’t trust you? Are you doing some negative self-talk about the situation?

### **STEP 4:**

**Make a plan to change your feelings.** There are several ways to do this. Pick one or two that work best for you:

- Think about alternative explanations for what is going on – just like we discussed in the last section.
- Think about something more pleasant (focus on the more positive or neutral self-talk). It’s just like changing channels on the television.
- Do something that you enjoy and takes concentration (divert your attention away from what is bothering you right now). For example, draw or color, read a book, watch a television show. Play with a pet. Play a game with a brother or sister or friend.
- Do something very active, especially if you feel “down” or sad. For example, go cycling, skate, swing, do cartwheels, do somersaults. Spin around until you’re dizzy, go swimming, have a water gun fight, build a sandcastle, play with your pet.

### **STEP 5:**

**Encourage your children to put their plan into action.**

Go over and practice these steps with your kids once in a while. The more you practice with them, the more likely they will remember the five steps when they need them. Make a poster of the five steps for their room. They will feel a lot better just knowing that there is something they can do when they are upset.

# 10 GETTING ON WITH LIFE

You may sometimes wonder if your life will ever be normal again. Your children probably wonder the same thing. They may think that things are hopeless; that things will never get better. On some days they will feel okay. They will think that maybe it's not so bad after all. As a parent, you can help them to learn new skills, as we've discussed throughout this manual. These skills can help them face their worries and problems; to move on with their lives; to cope with the bad days and try to have more of the good ones.

How well you move on with your life affects how well and how quickly your children can move on with theirs. Sometimes it's difficult to make good parenting decisions. It's hard when you are angry, hurt, or depressed.

- Try to be optimistic, encouraging, consistent, and calm. Your children will feel more reassured, safe, and loved.
- Take care of your health. Exercise and eat healthy food. Take time out to relax.
- Spend time with family and good friends.
- Put aside your disappointments and problems with the other parent. Work together as separate but cooperating parents. Your children will see less tension and conflict, and will stop worrying so much.
- Try to work with the other parent to develop consistent parenting styles.
- Talk about what you both expect for your children.
- Back one another up on discipline. If you can do all this, your children will feel more secure and behavior problems will lessen.
- Try to support your children's relationship with the other parent. Encourage them to spend as much time as possible in both households. By doing so, your children will feel fewer loyalty binds. They will thank you later for your tolerance and support.
- Remind your children that they are entitled to their childhood. Solving parents' problems is not their job. Their job is doing kid things: Enjoying their friends, getting involved in school activities, finding interesting and fun hobbies, playing sports, doing their homework, and helping out around the house.

Finally, remember that one day your children will look back on this time. They will judge both you and the other parent. They will remember how well the two of you handled this difficult time. Work hard now and they will think highly of you and your efforts later. Be a hero to your kids! It will have big payoffs for you, your children, and your grandchildren.



## Worksheet: Life after Separation

### IDEAS FOR COPING<sup>14</sup>

Many parenting relationships end in separation. Here are some ways in which parents cope. Consider the following activities that may give you pleasure or satisfaction in your life. Check off the options in this worksheet that you wish to do more often.

#### *Parenting*

- Establish a flexible routine with your child and stick to it.
- Enroll your child in an activity they enjoy.
- Get a sitter for a regular night out.
- Schedule a special, reserved time each week that you and your child can look forward to sharing.
- Find something new that you both would like to learn and learn it together.
- When your child completes a chore or achieves an accomplishment, surprise them with an activity that you both enjoy doing together.

#### *Enjoyment and Social*

- Consider activities you've enjoyed doing in the past or make a list of things you might enjoy doing in the future.
- Join a social club.
- Pursue single parent activities within your community
- Read a good book, take up chess, or learn to play an instrument.
- Start a hobby you really enjoy.
- Think of things you've been wanting to learn (a new skill, a new subject), then take a class to learn one of them.

#### *Emotional and Psychological*

- Look at your behavior and evaluate if any of it is keeping you from being a better parent.
- Share your feelings and experiences in a support group.
- Get some professional help (therapy, counseling, personal coaching) with any area of your life that has been a challenge for you.
- Help others as a volunteer or friend. In doing so, you will feel good about yourself and may learn more about yourself.

#### *Physical*

- Walk, jog and exercise daily or as often as possible.
- Join an exercise class or club or start one.
- Join a sports league.
- Go camping with groups or clubs.
- Learn a new physical skill (yoga, skiing, mountaineering, etc.)

#### *Self-Appreciation*

- Compliment yourself when you've done an effective job in parenting.
- Don't compare yourself with other parents who appear to be perfect (chances are, they aren't).
- Ask for help when you need it. You deserve it.
- Realize that you are a valuable person just the way you are, with imperfections like everyone else. No one is perfect at everything, you just do your best to improve your life step-by-step.

# 11 SUPPORT AND OTHER GROUPS

## **American Association for Marriage & Family Therapists**

[www.aamft.org](http://www.aamft.org)

1100 17th Street, N.W., 10th Floor

Washington, D.C. 20036

213-475-5352

## **The Children's Rights Council**

<http://www.crckids.org/>

## **Mediate.com**

PO Box 51090

Eugene, OR 97505

541-435-1629

[www.mediate.com](http://www.mediate.com)

## **National Center for Fathering**

[www.fathers.com](http://www.fathers.com)

## **Parents without Partners**

1650 S. Dixie Highway, Ste 510

Boca Raton, FL 33432

800-637-7074

[www.parentswithoutpartners.org](http://www.parentswithoutpartners.org)

## **Single Parent Resource Center**

31 E. 28th St.

New York, NY 10016 212-951-7030

<http://singleparentusa.com>

## **Step Together**

[www.steptogether.org](http://www.steptogether.org)



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**NOTES:**







Dedicated to advocating for children and helping parents to minimize the harmful effects divorce has on children.