

## Helping children cope with separation and divorce

If you are going through a divorce, you are probably concerned about the effect on your children. This can be a difficult time for them. Children's emotions may go through stages and change. Your child may feel sad, confused, angry, guilty or worried about what will happen to them. How you handle the changes will be important for your child's well-being.

### What should we tell our children about our separation/divorce?

- **Plan how you will tell your children.** If you can, it's best for both parents to do it together. Think about a good place and time to talk. Be honest, but also keep your children's ages in mind when deciding how much to tell them. Younger children will need less detail. Older children might ask for more information.
- **Reassure your children that you still love them** and that you will both go on caring for them. Let them know there will be many opportunities to spend time with both parents.
- **Be very clear that they are not the cause of the separation.** Young children especially will worry that they are to blame for the separation or divorce. Explain that this is an adult problem and there was nothing your children could do to prevent it. They also need to know that there is nothing they (or others) can do to change it. Help them understand that the divorce is final.
- **Encourage your children to talk openly about their feelings.** When they talk, listen carefully and try not to interrupt. It's normal for children to have trouble expressing their feelings, so be patient. Though it may be hard, it's important to let them be honest about their fears and concerns. Answer any questions as honestly as you can.

- If your child feels uncomfortable talking to you, **help them find someone they can trust** such as another family member, doctor, psychologist or social worker.
- **Tell your children only what they need to know.** Don't discuss adult decisions or argue in front of your children. They should not be involved in any meetings you have with a lawyer or others involved with the separation or divorce.

## What can we do to make the transition easier?

- **Discuss visitation arrangements** with the other parent before you suggest a plan to your children.
- **Once you have finalized your plans, talk openly about how the living arrangements will change.** Be clear about who your children will live with and when. They have a right to know the decisions that are being made on their behalf. Remember that plans may need to change as they grow older. Discuss the living arrangements with an older child or teen and be willing to respect their feelings about where they want to live.
- **Keep routines as normal as possible.** Children feel safe and more confident if they know what to expect. Work toward creating common routines for both households to follow.
- If you have **more than one child**, spend quality time alone with each child.
- **Don't speak negatively about the other parent to your children, extended family, or friends.** If you are struggling with your own feelings and emotions, find a supportive friend or counselor to talk to. You may find it helpful to set "ground rules" when talking with the other parent.
- Children may feel like they are alone in this situation. If possible, **seek out other families** with "two homes" so that your child can see that they aren't the only one whose parents live apart.
- **Be polite when your children are picked up or dropped off.** If you are loving and reassuring, it may help them cope with the transition.
- Let your child **talk to the other parent** whenever they need to. Try to show interest in the time they spend with the other parent. Don't suggest with words or actions that your child is disloyal if they enjoy the time away from you.

- **Respect reasonable limits set by the other parent.** Don't undermine the other parent's authority or reverse any decision he or she has made. Discuss rules and discipline with the other parent so that you're as consistent as possible in both households.
- **Communicate directly with the other parent, and don't expect children to act as messengers.** They shouldn't be expected to give you information about the other parent's activities, friends or income.
- Your children may feel like their **relationship with extended family**, such as aunts and uncles, is also changing. Recognize these feelings and give lots of opportunities to keep those connections.
- Keep **other important adults in your children's life** (teachers, child care providers, coaches) informed about what's happening so that they can watch for any warning signs that your child is having trouble coping.
- **Share important medical and school information** with the other parent. Try to attend meetings and appointments together so that you can both be informed.

## When should I call the doctor?

It will take time for your child to adjust to these changes. A younger child might start behaviours they had already outgrown. For example, they might ask for a pacifier. Older children might be angry or feel overwhelmed by the change. These are all normal reactions, and should get better over time.

Warning signs that your child is having more serious trouble can include:

- anxiety,
- sadness and depression,
- a change in eating or sleep habits,
- trouble at school, or
- aggressive behaviour.

If the behaviour continues or worsens, speak to your doctor.

There are many sources of support to help you and your children through this difficult time. If you need to, reach out to friends, relatives, and community or faith groups to ask for help.

It's also important to make time for yourself and allow yourself time to adjust to the change. You need to be healthy and rested for your children.

## What if there is a more serious problem?

Unfortunately, there are times when a separation or divorce may be the result of abuse in a relationship or in your home. If this is the case, it is important that you find a safe place for you and your children to stay. A shelter may be available in your community and can offer the support you need.

See your doctor or contact the local child welfare agency if you think your child is being abused or neglected.

## Additional resources

- Helping children and youth with divorce (Public Health Agency of Canada)  
(<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/healthy-living/because-life-goes-on-helping-children-youth-live-with-separation-divorce.html>)
- Families Change (Justice Education Society of BC)  
(<https://www.familieschange.ca/>)
- Divorce and Separation (Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development)  
(<http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/divorce-and-separation>)

## Reviewed by the following CPS committees

- Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities Committee



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