

Family School Liaison Program

Horizon School Division No.67

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Supporting Children Through Separation and Divorce

A separation or divorce is a stressful time for all family members. Therefore, it is crucial for parents to speak to their children about the separation and what to expect. If at all possible, this should be done before parents physically separate or soon after. Children need to understand and be provided an explanation of what is happening so they are given the opportunity to ask questions about what happens next. Furthermore, providing an explanation may help a child to understand that he or she is not to blame for the separation or divorce. Even though parents may feel anxiety about having this conversation for fear of how their children will react, it goes a long way in establishing a healthy pattern of communication with your children. Additionally, it can help children and adolescents cope with the many changes in their lives.

Ideas to Help Plan Your Discussion:

1. Think about the tone in your voice regardless of how you feel. Try to

both agree to contain your anger in front of your children. Your sadness and tears are OK.

2. Having the discussion about your separation should not be used as an opportunity to harm your child's relationship with the other parent.
3. Reassurances about continued love and caretaking after separation are important. Inappropriate details of why the divorce is happening should be avoided.
4. Before talking to your children if possible, work out an interim agreement about what your living arrangements will be. Then when your children have questions like where they will live and when they will see each parent, you will have some beginning answers.
5. Research shows that the vast majority of children are torn and



don't want to make this decision, they want opportunities to be with both.

6. Don't rush; allow your children time to react. Accept their anger, tears, and fears and encourage questions both now and in the future. If your children don't want to talk anymore give them time and talk to them again in a few days.

7. Use age appropriate language depending on the age of your children. Ask questions to see if they understand.

What Do Children and Adolescent Want and Need to Know About the Separation?

1. That a decision was made to separate and when it will happen. Be honest if the separation is going to lead to divorce.
2. Reassure them that the decision was not caused by them and was not their fault. Let them know that this was an adult decision.
3. Let them know that the separation is between mom and dad and that you are not divorcing them.
4. Tell them where each of you will be living and where the children will be living. Be clear with them that they will continue to see and be with both parents.
5. Emphasize that you don't want your children feeling like they have to take sides, this is something you two need to work out.
6. Try to let your children remain in the same school with the same friends as it is important not to make too many changes too quickly.
7. Children and adolescent will wonder why you are divorcing. This is normal, and a brief answer is appropriate. Some ideas are: We are not happy living together anymore. We find ourselves angry and arguing all the time and this is not a good way for adults or children to live. We tried to make

things work between us, but we just were not able. Over the years we grew apart, from each other (reassure children your love for them hasn't stopped).

Tips for Divorcing Parents

There is no specific guide that can promise a way to maneuver kids through a divorce unhurt. Each situation and family is different. However, there are some guidelines that may make it a bit easier. The following suggestions can assist in making the process less painful for children and adolescents.

- As you go through the process of separation it is important to manage your own mental health. If feelings of depression, anxiety or anger continue to overwhelm you seek help. Managing your feelings can help you assist your children to manage and understand their own.
- Kids need to be encouraged to openly discuss their feelings – positive or negative - they need to discuss what's happening. It is important for parents to sit down with their kids and encourage them to say what they are thinking and feeling. Even though we might not like what they have to say, children need a forum to discuss what they are feeling and they need to feel safe in doing so.
- Make the discussion of divorce and how it is affecting the kids an ongoing process. Keep checking in with them. If parents feel they are getting too upset to be a real help to their kids ask someone else to talk to them (maybe a relative or counsellor).
- Seek out group programs for kids of divorce where they can get support from other kids going through the same thing. Children may struggle with divorce for a long time but quite often the real impact can be felt over about a two to three year period.
- Don't bad mouth your ex in front of the kids, even if you are angry

or feuding. This can confuse children and make them angry with the parent who is saying negative things. Children don't like to hear a parent being criticized. On the other hand it important to



acknowledge real events. It is not your responsibility to explain the other parent's behavior.

- Try not to use kids as a go between or messengers when going back and forth between parents places. Don't question your children about what is happening at the other parent's household. Whenever possible, communicate directly with the other parent about scheduling, visitation, health issues, or school problems.
- Seek support groups, friendships, and counselling. Whenever possible, kids should be encouraged to have as positive an outlook on both parents as they can. Even under the best of circumstances divorce can be painful and disappointing for kids.

Ten Tips For Success In Resolving Parenting Disputes

1. Be child-focused. Parents must learn to love their children more than they dislike each other.
2. Learn to distinguish between a bad partner and bad parent.
3. Never speak negatively to the child about the other parent.

4. Never argue or fight in front of the children.
5. Listen to the other parent's point of view even if you don't agree with it.
6. Consider mediation before giving the decision-making power to a judge.
7. Separate your financial issues from you parent issues.
8. Be flexible and reasonable in making access arrangements.
9. Your children still see you as a family, so communicate.
10. Don't hesitate to get help. Family breakdown is one of the most stressful and painful experiences anyone can go through.

Resources

From the book Tug of War: A Judge's Verdict on Separation, Custody Battles, and the Bitter Realities of Family Court (ECW Press). Copyright © Mr. Justice Harvey Brownstone, 2009. Ask for it at your local bookstore or library.

<http://www.shared-care.ca/toolkits-seperation>

<http://kidshealth.org>

Positive parenting, separation & divorce and topics section just for kids and teens

– interactive, animation, humour... check it out!

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

Practical information for children, young people and parents going through a

family break-up

<http://www.familieschange.ca>

A guide for parents going through separation/divorce. The guide explains how to

make effective use of the Web site, and provides a list of books on the subject of separation and divorce.

A kid's guide to separation and divorce <http://www.familieschange.ca>