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Divorce & Separation - Helping Children & Parents to Cope

As parents, we all hope to build a safe familiar world for our children to grow up in. When your children experience the ordinary losses and disappointments of life, as an adult you can stand back a bit from their distress and offer them your sympathy and support. But when you face a serious family loss or upheaval, it is a struggle to manage your own grief, disappointment or anger, so at first you may not be able to help your children. It is not surprising that at times most parents find this double burden too much to cope with.

We hope this leaflet will help you to understand how you and your children may be feeling and to think about what may be best for all of you when relationships go seriously wrong or break down.



How parents come to terms with separation

Separation affects everyone. The loss of a shared life and giving up the idea of a future together for the family is bound to be painful. Most people do manage to make the adjustment, but it can be a long haul and there will be times when you can't see how things will turn out. You need to make allowances for yourself and your children for some time – maybe for several years.

Living with the children

Many people feel very alone at times like this particularly if they become a lone parent. Before you can give support to your children, you need to feel supported yourself. If you are fortunate, you have understanding and supportive family and friends who rally round. Some people also turn to their own cultural and religious communities. This can be a valuable source of support.

There is a natural and inevitable temptation to fill the gap left by your partner by taking one of your children into your confidence. But this puts your child in a very difficult position and may stop them being able to turn to you as a parent.

This may be the time to talk to someone who is not personally involved – perhaps your GP in the first instance and help with a referral to a local counselling service.

Keeping in contact with both parents

Even when children feel it is better for their parents to part, almost all of them want to know that it is not going to cost them one of their parents. They will want to keep in touch with both of you and with the wider family generally, including their grandparents. If you have separated by mutual agreement, you are probably able to work together to soothe your child through the difficult changes ahead. However, when the parent with the main care of the children and the parent who has the contact find it difficult to see each other's point of view, the child's experience of the separation is much more difficult. The parent who has left the family home almost certainly feels that they have to cope with more changes in their daily life than the one who stays there with the children. They may feel they are increasingly losing touch with the everyday lives of the children and have to find new ways of being together with the children.

Some parents find the loss of daily contact with their children so painful, and the children's distress so difficult to cope with, that they decide it is better to make a clean break.

But children feel deeply hurt and rejected when a parent suddenly disappears from their life even if the parent thought they were acting for the best.

When regular visits are not possible, regular letters, internet contact, photographs, birthday cards and phone calls make a child feel cared about by both parents.

For some children the possibility of contact causes great distress. This may be related to exposure to violence or other traumas and professional help may be needed for the child. Whilst social media platforms can be a useful way to catch up and keep in contact with children they need to be kept away from access to parental conflict and disagreements being aired on these sites.

Visits

Arrangements must be faithfully kept so that your child is not let down. This can be difficult for both parents.

- From the point of view of the resident parent, visits may seem annoyingly like treats while they have the daily responsibility of sorting out routine chores and activities, such as school, homework and discipline. If contact arrangements ('access') are flexible, they may feel that they can never make their own plans or have any privacy.

- The visiting parent may see questions about what will happen during a visit as doubting their parenting ability.

Protecting children from adult problems

When adults are angry with each other, misunderstandings can easily occur. Try to put the children first this is a very vulnerable time for them. They are still learning about and sorting out their day to day feelings and conflicts. To then experience parents locked in 'battle' can be confusing and frightening for them.

- Remember you are both still parents even if you are no longer partners.
- Children need to be kept clear of conflict, aggression and hostility which might well arise between parents. If you are not able to contain this, either the couple or individual should request professional help for themselves through mediation or counselling.
- Resist any temptation to use contact arrangements as a way of paying back an ex-partner. Try not to let the mood you are in affect the arrangements, leaving your child not knowing what to expect.
- Your child is very tuned into your state of mind. You need to be honest with yourself about the messages you are conveying to them. For instance, if you feel uncertain or unhappy about visits, your child may not feel free to come and go or be able to benefit from the contact with their other parent.
- Financial insecurity may lead to short tempers, anxiety, and nagging that is hard to conceal from children, but do try.

Further help

You may find it helpful to contact a group of other lone parents, such as Gingerbread, or your own community group for information and support.

If you have concerns about your children you may find it helpful to talk to your health visitor, GP or school about a referral to your local NHS Child and Family Guidance Centre.

For adults, local dispute resolution and mediation services exist through the courts, National Family Mediation or privately. Often the practical arrangements for contact with the ex-partner are a problem. There may be a contact centre in your area which provides a neutral safe place for contact visits. They often help when ex-partners do not want to meet face to face. If you need specialised legal advice, solicitors who are members of the Family Law Association are able to help. The library or town hall can help you with addresses for the services mentioned or look in the telephone book under your local health authority.

How children come to terms with separation

Children usually wish that their parents would stay together. Sometimes they try to bring them together again by being very good. Younger children may imagine that it will all go back to how it was if they think and behave in a 'magically' good way.

Children develop by becoming able to face difficult experiences and they learn from seeing how you struggle through. Even if your child is having problems, it doesn't necessarily mean things are going badly. It may be that they are struggling hard and will come through well in the end.

Loss from separation and divorce is different from loss through death. The family relationships which the child was part of have gone, yet the people themselves are still around in the world leading different lives. Their behavior can seem selfish and unnecessary to the child.

It may be hard for the child to understand and name what they have lost.

They may be confused about whether the loving family they once thought they had ever really existed at all.

What children need to know

You don't need to tell your child all the details about the breakdown of the relationship with your ex-partner, but it is important for them to know the facts about their future. For instance:

- when they will see their other parent and their grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins
- whether they will be moving house or changing schools.

You may feel tempted to persuade one, or all, of your children to take your side against your ex-partner. This is not in the child's best interests. They may well feel disloyal whatever they do and it makes it more difficult for them to sort out their own feelings.

How children express their feelings

Your children may need to fill you with all the anger, doubts and helplessness they feel overwhelmed by themselves. It is easier for them to cope when they are able to make their suffering clear and to feel confident that their needs will go on being met. It may feel to you as if they are telling you that everything you try to do is wrong, but it is their way of asking you to help them.

For most parents, their children's anger and sense of betrayal is far too close to what they are feeling themselves and this is difficult to manage. Sadly, children may feel that not only have they lost the parent who has gone, but that the one who has stayed with them is terribly changed.

Children, like adults, react in their own way to stress and unhappiness. Their reactions are likely to be different at different ages:

Under five

Young children normally experience anxiety when they are separated from a parent. This anxiety usually shows itself in crying, clinging and difficult behavior. With the additional stress of family break-up, you must expect the child to find separations and changes even harder to manage. They may show great reluctance to leave you for a contact visit, and then have a tantrum when it is time to say goodbye to their other parent at the end of the visit. This is distressing for everyone, although it is natural in the circumstances.

Middle childhood

Children aged between about six and eleven years old have a better understanding of what is happening, but are not able to deal with the conflict of loyalty the separation stirs up. They may even blame themselves and have feelings of guilt. They need you to accept that they are in turmoil and to understand that they may take this out on those around them before their life begins to settle down again. School can sometimes be a haven for the child but you need to be patient if they are not coping as well as they did with friends and school.

Adolescence

This is an important time for sorting out a young person's sense of themselves, their identity. For an adolescent, their parents' separation makes them feel insecure just as they are wanting to start to separate themselves from their families as part of their normal development. Adolescents also feel guilty too, because they feel that they have caused the separation. Some teenagers deal with this by a sudden angry rush towards independence, as a way of not facing what is happening at home. For others, the uncertainty may pull them back into the family. It is important for adolescents to have contact with the parent of the same sex.

The child who makes little fuss and withdraws into themselves is the one to be most concerned about.

You should take special care to offer a child like this as much time and consideration as you would if they were more obviously having problems. If you are in doubt as to how concerned you should be, you may find it helpful to talk to your child's teacher or your GP or health visitor as to whether you should seek further help.

Whatever the age of your child at the time of the separation and their reaction at the time, it is something they will continue to sort out in their minds in different ways as they grow up. So be prepared for difficulties to resurface whenever there are changes and uncertainties to be managed.

Guidance and boundaries

Children probably experience a lot of inconsistency from distressed, preoccupied adults during the separation. You may feel anxious about what your children are allowed to do when they are with your ex-partner or you may discover that your own new partner looks at behaviour and boundaries in a different way. Try not to take this situation out on the children. Parents need to understand that they have a responsibility to sort it out.

Parents can sometimes lose their sense of proportion about discipline and behaviour when they are anxious about the possible effects of the separation on the children. They may see good

behaviour chiefly as a reassurance that the children have not suffered, or they may become more intolerant of bad behaviour because of the worry and guilt it stirs up.

Stepfamilies

When families break up, it is often to form new families. If you have a new partner, you hope to build a new future for your family together.

You need to remember that you are asking a lot of your children just when they are trying to manage the loss of one parent. They have to:

- learn to cope with the new adult who seems to have taken mum or dad's place
- get to know step-grandparents, step-brothers and sisters and, of course, babies born of the new relationship
- sort out old loyalties and new jealousies
- get used to different ways of doing things and new living arrangements, such as shared bedrooms.

Even for very young children, it is important to be clear that your new partner doesn't automatically become a new mum or dad. Such a close relationship can only grow in time – and then only if a step-parent and step-child really do have a feeling for one another. It is better in the meantime to accept that a certain distance is inevitable and more respectful for all concerned.

Your ex-partner also does not want to feel that someone else has taken their place as dad or mum. If you take things slowly, it may be possible to sort out an arrangement with which everyone feels comfortable.

Adopted Children

Adopted parents separating can feel for parents and children like a double loss as they both hoped and longed for this second opportunity for a secure and stable family life. This can become complex and complicated for parents and children.

Help can be found through local adoption support services.

Points to remember

- Be available for your child
- Your child needs time, space and privacy to sort out their feelings about your relationship.
- You may feel your relationship with your ex-partner is irreconcilable, but your child needs to rebuild their picture of a loved parental couple. This is much easier if it was once a loving

relationship than if you were always unhappy together. Your child has to struggle with this on their own. You can love your children and look after them while they work this out, but you can't do it for them.

- Children often blame themselves for a divorce, especially if they have been naughty or feel they have tried to monopolise one parent. You need to tell them that it was not their fault.
- If you are preoccupied with your new life, you may also expect your child to put the past behind them. But starting again is not an option for your child. It may place a great barrier between you and your child if you convey to them your excitement about starting again. It may not feel like this to your child.
- If parents find new partners, and perhaps start new families, it can seem to the children of the original family that they are no longer your primary concern and that they are the only ones paying the price of the failed relationship.
- If there are changes to the gender of the new couple, parents will need to be aware that children will need time to understand and get used to this, and to be available for questions about the changes and anxieties around the sexuality of the parental couple.
- In the early days after the separation, children find it easier if parents conduct their new social and sexual lives when they are not around.
- If possible, allow time for your child to adjust to the separation before introducing something or someone new to cope with.
- Be prepared to take your child seriously if they are not ready for the next step.

Further help – organisations

In every area there are organisations that provide support and services for children and families. Your GP or health visitor will be able to offer you advice and, if needed, refer you to specialist services. To find out more about local supporting agencies, visit your library, your town or county hall, or contact your local council for voluntary service.

About this leaflet

Understanding Childhood is a series of leaflets written by experienced child and adolescent psychoanalytic psychotherapists to give parents, grandparents, carers and professionals additional insight into children's feelings and view of the world and to help make sense of their behaviour. Originally written for the Child Psychotherapy Trust they have been reviewed and updated and are now published by the ACP. The full series is available on the ACP website

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