

Assisting Young Children

WITH SEPARATION & DIVORCE

Regardless of how you see the situation, your children see & experience it differently.

Younger children have a limited ability to understand what is happening during a separation or divorce, what they are feeling and why. This however does not stop them from trying to figure out the 'big picture'. Why should Mom or Dad move out just because they have been arguing? It is very difficult for children to understand why the two most important people in their lives can not get along. This is why younger children often blame themselves or invent reasons for their parents' separation or divorce. They may imagine that a parent will leave and will never see them again. Too afraid to tell anyone, they believe they are the only one in the world that feels this way.

Children develop a bond and a deep sense of loyalty to both parents no matter what the circumstances of the separation or divorce. Most children believe their parents will get back together or wish they would. Even children who have experienced or witnessed abuse may want their parents to stay together. Young children cannot separate themselves from their parents. Because they learn and build their sense of self by watching and interacting with their parents, when they witness parents arguing they experience it as if they were personally involved. When parents continually argue, children get caught in the middle. They worry about having to take sides and about pleasing both parents. This is a very heavy burden for a child.

Messages- What Children Need to Hear

One of the hardest and most emotional steps in the whole process is talking to your children about separation / divorce. How parents handle this step not only sets the pattern for future discussions but also influences the children's future level of trust. Telling your children will trigger a variety of emotions from confusion, fear and sadness to anger. Your children need to hear and believe that:

- **Both Mom and Dad still love me.** While feelings can change between adults they never change between children and parents. A parent loves a child forever.
- **Both Mom and Dad will be there in my life.** We will not abandon you either physically or emotionally.
- **Mom and Dad will continue to take care of me, provide for me and keep me safe.**
- **Mom and Dad are sorry for the hurt this is causing me.**
- **I am not the cause of the separation or divorce**
- **They are not going to ask me to take sides.**
- **Mom and Dad will stop arguing and fighting.**
- **Who (Mom or Dad) is moving and where they will live.**
- **How often I will see each parent**
- **Where I will live.** While they will honour my wishes, Mom and Dad will decide where I will live.
- **My relationships with my grandparents and other relatives will continue.**
- **The separation or divorce is final.** This was not an easy decision to make. We put a lot of effort into making our relationship work, but we can no longer live together.
- **Mom and Dad will never stop loving me.**



How to Help Your Children (at Any Age)

- **Be demonstrative** – show your affection in words and actions. Children need to know how much they are loved by their parents.
- **Protect your children from conflict** – do not argue in front of them. It is essential you protect your children from witnessing arguments or violence between their parents.

If you are experiencing strong feelings about the separation you might find a support group or a counsellor to help you work through your feelings away from your children.

- **Allow your children to express their feelings.** Acknowledging their feelings allows them to feel that they are entitled to feelings.
- **Allow for grief.** Children grieving the loss of family may express feelings of anger towards you.

When your child is upset try mirroring – stating back what your child is saying. If your child says *I hate you Mommy. You made Daddy leave.* You can mirror back *Right now you feel like you hate me because you think I made Daddy leave.* This gives the child a sense of being heard.

- **Play with your children.** Play is the work of childhood. Playing with your children allows them to develop emotionally, intellectually and socially.
- **Avoid speaking about the other parent in negative terms.** Children do not need to hear the details about why you are separating. They are burdened by this information.
- **Spend time alone with each child.**
- **Maintain as much routine and continuity as possible.** Stick to a daily routine and make changes after much discussion and reassurance. Maintain rituals around birthdays and holidays.
- **Continue to set reasonable rules and limits for your children's behaviour.**
- **Ensure you children have opportunities to spend time with family and friends.**
- **Stay in touch with child care providers and teachers.** They are good sources of information and most will happily share their observations and insights.
- **Do not make any promises to your children you cannot keep.**
- **Look after yourself as your children are depending on you.**



Seek Professional Help When

- ✓ Your child's distress and problems are constant and chronic
- ✓ Your child's symptoms get worse rather than better over time
- ✓ You feel unable to cope with your child.