

## **Divorced Parents:**

Parents, who have been separated or divorced, have a lot to deal with. The job of parenting children throughout a divorce presents a lifetime of quite unique difficulties. They have to sort out the kind of access children should have with each parent. They have to work out complex schedules for the children keeping in mind each parents work commitments and the complex schedule of their children which includes school, extra-curricular activities, and friends. The practical issues involved in trying to be a stable divorced family can be onerous indeed. It can be a logistical nightmare trying to synchronise all of the different people and their needs.

One of the things that many people who are going about getting separated or divorced forget is that though they feel they are separating from their 'difficult' partner, they actually have to remain co-parents forever. In fact, parents who have children can never really separate or divorce themselves from each other. They still have to communicate, co-operate, and relate to each other as family members. In this way, the notion of a separation or divorce is in many ways an illusion. Because children need their parents, and the obligation in being a parent is to be there for life, being separated or divorced does not permit a spouse to write the other person out of their life. It's just not possible.

What most parents come to realise is that they have to co-operate, communicate, and collaborate together regardless. It can be a real eye-opener for spouses who think they have "washed that man right out of their hair". For many spouses, the real parenting begins after separation.

As I am sure you know from your own family experiences, the effects on separation and divorce on children are, for a while at least, very distressing. Children however are not all traumatised by this. Most children readjust their lives and function as well as they would have had their parents remained together. However, despite long-term improvement, the whole process is distressing for all involved. The points at which the greatest difficulties are experienced are when a child has to transfer from one parent's home to the others. These events are when children and parents feel most distressed and vulnerable.

Many mothers' will say to me that when their child returns back from their father's house he or she is often upset, irritable, and not themselves. When this goes on for a period of time the mother can often conclude that the child is upset because of what has happened at the father's house or because of having to be at their father's house. The mother can conclude that going to visit with the father only upsets the child and will often think that what is best is that the child stop going to the father's.

While this can sometimes be the necessary outcome, in most instances the distress of the child is not caused by the father, but by the emotional distress caused by shifting homes – by having to switch from one parent to the other. This is very common and what the mother really has to do is to allow the child a little time to readjust back and to understand that the child's upset or irritability is a consequence of change rather than a consequence of the father's behaviour. Changing from one house to the other does, in itself, stir up feelings for a child that he or she does not understand and he/she may feel angry, sad, or distressed for reasons that he/she is not aware of. Most children, when asked why they are so 'cranky' will, understandably respond with 'I don't know' or 'I'm not cranky – just leave me alone!'

Another common error I hear people making about divorce is to suggest that the children are going through a grieving process and that what they are going through is like bereavement. Though this analogy allows people to be appropriately sensitive to a child's feelings, it is not always an accurate one. Bereavement and grieving suggest that the child is dealing with profound sadness and loss. This is certainly the case in many aspects of divorce, but the child is also dealing with the effects of trauma, with uncertainty, with fear, and with a loss of identity. So a child is not just feeling sad but also feeling scared, uncertain, and angry. Fear or anger can be more powerful than loss. To exaggerate my point, when the rug has been pulled from underneath the stability of a child's life, he/she is dealing with more than loss or grief. It is not a death they are dealing with, but often with a trauma. They have some things in common but they are not the same.

It is amazing to me, in my work, to find that no matter how many children I meet from broken families, and no matter how problematic were the marriages in those families, most children still want their parents to be back together. Though there is much emotion in these declarations, this can also be understood from a purely practical point of view. The life of a child can become so complicated when their parents split –up that they just want their lives to be made simpler and for their parents to talk.

What makes life particularly difficult is when parents do not communicate at all. When this happens the situation, over time, often becomes impossible for the child. It becomes so for the simple reasons that each parent is encouraging their child to have a relationship with someone they themselves cannot relate to. You can appreciate how confusing and difficult this is for children as they grow up. It is often a case of ‘do as I say, not as I do’. Children will often find their own solutions to this unsolvable equation – they either cut-off contact with one parent or they just gradually withdraw from both.

For that reason, every effort should be made by even the most estranged of parents to find ways to build some rapport with each other. That rapport need only be very basic. Contact need only be business-like, courteous, and brief to give a child a sense of confidence. You do not need to trust someone, have an intimate relationship with them, expose your vulnerability to them, or forgive them for past wrongs to have a courteous, polite, and agreeable relationship with them. You do not need to a trusting relationship with a shopkeeper to be polite to them. A child needs to witness such courtesy. Some parents think that courtesy to the other is a sign of giving-in. It’s not. It’s a sign of maturity. For a child, it’s soothes their anxiety about the world.