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What Should  
We Tell  
the Children?

... *A Parents' Guide  
for Talking About  
Separation and Divorce*®

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# What Should We Tell the Children?

*... A Parents' Guide  
for Talking About  
Separation and Divorce*®

These materials were prepared under the auspices of a committee commissioned by **Marlene Eskind Moses**, 2009 President-Elect of the **AMERICAN ACADEMY OF MATRIMONIAL LAWYERS**.

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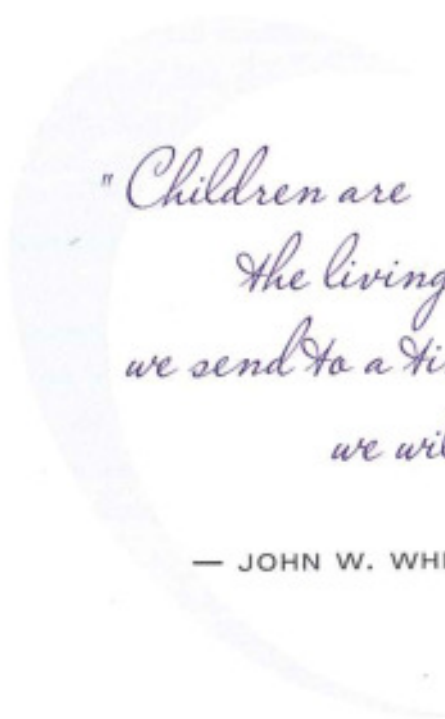
## Introduction

*When parents are about to separate, the best thing they can do is prepare their children and adolescents for what is about to happen. Not many parents plan ahead for this important discussion, even fewer do this planning together, and most parents don't say enough when telling children about the separation.*

*This booklet was designed to help parents think about and accomplish a difficult task: what to say to your children when you are separating. Separation is the central (and first) event for most children, whether you are divorcing or ending a brief or long-term relationship. You will get ideas about what children need to hear, how to prepare for and talk to your children about separation, and how to handle your own and your children's emotions. It will also alert you to less helpful and sometimes damaging comments to children that emerge from parental angers and disappointments.*

*The primary goal is to make discussions with your children about separation a bit easier for you and more helpful and meaningful for them. A larger, very important goal is to increase your children's and adolescents' ability to deal successfully with the stress and disruptions of your separation*

*You will notice that there are nine sections in this booklet. It will be most helpful if you and the other parent read the whole thing. If you can't find the time, or want help with a certain topic immediately, each section is listed here for quick reference.*



*"Children are  
the living messages  
we send to a time  
we will not see."*

— JOHN W. WHITEHEAD

## Topics

PAGE

- i. Why Is It So **Important** to Talk with Your Children at This Time? ..... 1
- ii. Why Do Parents Find It So **Difficult** to Talk with Their Children? ..... 2
- iii. **Preparing** to Talk with Your Children about the Separation ..... 4
- iv. Things to **Consider** In Talking to Your Children about Separation ..... 8
- v. What Do Children and Adolescents **Need to Know** and How Do You Say It? ..... 10
- vi. What to Say to Your Children about **Why** You Are Separating ..... 13
- vii. Dealing with Your **Emotions** and Those of Your Children ..... 16
- viii. **Special Circumstances:**  
Violence, Child Abuse, Mental Illness ..... 20
- ix. **Resources** ..... 23

*"Each day of our lives  
we make deposits in the  
memory banks of our children."*

— CHARLES R. SWINDOLL



## 1. Why Is It So **Important** to Talk with Your Children at This Time?

**F**or most children and adolescents, the separation of their parents is a big crisis in their lives. Hearing that parents are about to separate turns the worlds of children and adolescents upside down. The most common emotional reactions are fear, anger, sadness, anxiety about the future, and confusion. They are shaken. They worry about how the separation will affect their lives. They want to ask questions but are afraid to. When parents don't explain about the separation, these normal feelings are heightened, and children are afraid to ask what is happening.

The way that children and adults deal most effectively with life crises is to seek out or receive as much relevant information as possible. This calms them, provides structure, helps them organize their thinking, generates new questions and answers, reduces their anxiety, and helps them to feel more secure. Both children and adults then continue to add information as it is available to them.

Surprisingly few parents sit down together to announce and discuss their pending (or recent) separation with their children, explaining what is happening, describing how things will change, encouraging questions and feedback. This booklet will give parents ideas, structure, and courage.

Talking to children about separation (and listening to them) is not one short conversation. Hopefully, when parents talk to them in the ways suggested in this booklet, it will be the beginning of many discussions about the separation and divorce, how they are doing, what they feel they need, their feelings, their worries, their hopes, their love for you, and their futures.

## ii. Why Do Parents Find It So Difficult to Talk with Their Children?

Most parents dread telling their children about the separation. As a result, they tend to put it off and say very little. Some research indicates that nearly half of parents just provide a "one-liner" to their children, such as: "Your mom is leaving!" "Your dad doesn't love us...he left today." This is not enough! Children and adolescents of all ages need appropriate (but not angry) information to help them cope with the separation and manage their thoughts and feelings.

There are many reasons that talking and listening to children about separation is such a hard parental task. Understanding why it is so difficult may help you.

First of all, most parents simply do not know *what* to say. How much detail, how truthful, how much about the reasons for the separation? As a result, they feel paralyzed.

Many parents worry that separation and divorce will damage their children's emotional adjustment. Consequently, they put off the responsibility for telling their children as long as possible.

Parents avoid talking about separation because they are afraid of their children's strong emotional reactions. They anticipate their children will be upset, tearful, maybe angry, and certainly sad. Naturally, they don't look forward to this challenging experience. Already feeling emotionally raw or fragile, parents fear they won't be able to handle their children's feelings. "What if I cry?" some parents ask.

Some parents feel guilty about the separation. Others feel they have failed. They may have initiated the separation or contributed to marital troubles that led to the divorce. They know that seeing their children's response to talking about separation will increase their guilty feelings.



Sometimes the discussion about separation is put off because a parent worries that the children will hear angry or inappropriate comments from the other parent.

Parents sometimes fear an older child or adolescent will blame them for the divorce. They don't want to be the "bad guy" in all this. Maybe their child or adolescent will reject them in favor of the other parent.

It's a very rough time for most parents emotionally. Talking with children about the separation feels like a burden, a difficult and risky one. But generally, parents feel relieved afterwards, and sometimes amazed by their children's comments.



### iii. Preparing to Talk with Your Children about the Separation

It is best to talk to your children before you actually separate. If you can sit down together with your partner in a civil manner to do this, the children will benefit. It is hard for many parents to even consider doing this together because of hurt or angry feelings, or not wanting to sit in the same room. If you feel it is really impossible to talk jointly with the children, then set up sequential times to talk.<sup>1</sup>

Set aside a time to *prepare* for telling the children about separation. Having a plan will lower your anxiety and make it work better for the children.

- Ask each other what you think should be said—what are the most important points for your children to hear?
- Listen respectfully and respond with your own ideas. Write down and exchange your ideas if you have trouble communicating about this.
- Figure out how you can be factual but not emotionally harmful to the child or to the relationship between each child and parent.
- Develop an acceptable “script” of who says what and in how much detail.

Very important things to consider:

- What will be the tone of the discussion? Despite how angry you feel, can you agree to contain your anger, accusations, and harsh words?
- Telling children about separation and divorce should *never* be used as an opportunity to degrade or destroy the children’s relationship with a parent, no matter how angry you or your partner is or what either of you have done.
- What topics will be off limits? Children don’t need to know details about strictly adult behaviors or feelings, such as affairs, feeling betrayed or details about financial matters.

Many parents use mediation, consultation, counseling, or collaborative law to work out together what they intend to say to their children. Often just one session before separation is very helpful.

There is no way to do this perfectly, even with a good script for what to say. And you can not protect your children from the pain of separation. But you *can* start a dialogue with your children to ensure their best outcome.<sup>2</sup>

Parents often ask *when* to tell their children—how much advance notice is needed before you separate?

- There is no perfect time to tell your children about the pending separation and no single rule. Experts vary somewhat on this issue, but your children's age and maturity are your guide.
- The general view is that older youngsters (ages 7–8 and up) benefit by having 2–3 weeks before separation to begin processing this information and emotionally preparing for the separation.
- Younger children (ages 3 to 5 or 6) can be told 4–5 days before separation. Telling them earlier is not helpful. They have not developed a mature sense of time and will not understand when it is going to happen or what it really means until one of you moves out. They may anxiously ask each day if this is the day that daddy or mommy is moving out.
- Infants won't understand any explanation and toddlers should not be told more than a day in advance. It will become real when a toddler observes one of you moving out. An infant who has formed an attachment (about 7 months of age) to you both will notice in a day or two that one of you is no longer there. Talking about mommy or daddy who has moved will help reassure them that you still exist, and they should see you in the next few days to avoid an increase in anxiety.

Expect that it will be difficult for everyone no matter the timing.

If one of you moved out hurriedly, or you just couldn't agree on how to talk to your children before the separation, you should talk to them as soon as possible to help them make sense of what is going on.

Will you tell the children all together as a group or separately? Most experts think it is good to tell children together and then follow up with a separate time to talk with children of different ages. But if you have a toddler and a school age child, talk to your older child first, and then deal separately with the very young child.

Try to work out a temporary agreement about what the living arrangements or parenting time will be before you talk with your children. Then when your children ask where they will live, where each of you will live, and when they will see each of you, you have some beginning answers for them. Tell them it may be changed later down the road, but this is what's going to happen immediately. If you haven't decided all of this or need professional help to work it out, go ahead and talk to the children anyway. Simply tell them that they will still see and be with each of you regularly, and that the exact schedule of times with each of you will be decided as soon as possible. And if they have any ideas you would like to hear them.

Parents sometimes argue about whether their children will have "one home" or "two homes" to live in. If you each provide a place for your children to feel welcome in each of your homes, your children will feel like they have two homes. This is particularly true if they spend enough time with each of you. Parents worry that sharing physical custody in some way is confusing for children, or that "going back and forth" is a burden for them. But research indicates that most children and adolescents like the idea of spending lots of time with each parent.<sup>3</sup> They feel more loved and nurtured than children who only see their nonresidential parent once or twice a month, and they do well in their adjustment. They feel that the transitions between their two homes are worth it!

Divorce research with children indicates that most children love each of their parents, want them to be active in their lives, and want plenty of opportunities to be with both parents after separation. See the Special Circumstances section for less common situations in which children do not want contact with a parent.

*Your children do not want to be "divorced" from either one of you. Telling the children about the separation will be your first opportunity to reassure them that despite the separation and/or divorce, you love them now and forever and will always be their parents. You simply will love and care for them in separate homes.*

*Remember, this is for the children, and your best efforts will be required.* Later as you look back on this turbulent time, you will feel good about yourself for being mature and handling this in the best possible way, given the circumstances.

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- <sup>1</sup> In families where there has been intense parental conflict, violence, child abuse, substance abuse, or mental illness, telling the children together may be volatile, damaging and/or entail risk. See the Special Circumstances section of this booklet for more information.
  - <sup>2</sup> Some children and adolescents are relieved by their parents' separation, most often those who have experienced high tension, conflict and violence between their parents. These youngsters hope that the separation means the end of their anxiety, fear, wariness, having to take sides, being protective, high tension, and will provide a chance to live a more peaceful life. Hopefully you can help them move into this next phase.
  - <sup>3</sup> This assumes that both parents love their children, are capable of adequate parenting, and that parenting capacity is not compromised by violence, substance abuse, mental illness, or a history of child abuse.



## iv. Things to Consider in Talking to Your Children about Separation

**W**hat is your intent at this time? If you were married, is the separation leading to divorce or not? If one or both of you have decided on divorce, and nothing will change that decision, don't sugar coat the discussion with your children and say that you don't know. If you see the separation as temporary, hoping that separation and counseling may help the relationship, tell them that. If you have separated before, how is this separation going to be different for your children?

Will you separate but remain in the same home? Sometimes parents can not afford a second home at the time of the separation, or live in a state where they risk losing parental and/or financial entitlements if one of them moves out. Many of these parents separate inside the family residence, often by moving to the basement, or into another bedroom. Children definitely notice these things and wonder what's happening.

Your children's ages, maturity, and developmentally-related abilities will determine how well they understand certain words, abstract language and big concepts. This will shape what you say, how you say it, and how much you say. Appropriate language will help them process this information and think about how these dramatic family changes will affect them.

- Children under the age of 6 will need you to use very concrete language and simple explanations to help them understand what is happening. Pre-school children don't know what it means when you use abstract concepts such as "We are going to separate" or "Mommy and Daddy decided to get a divorce."
- Short sentences work better than lengthy complex ones and will hold their attention better.

- Basic reassurances about continued love and caregiving from each parent are important. Details of why the divorce is happening are not. See Section VI "What To Say To Your Children About Why You Are Separating?" for suggestions.
- As children get older, they are increasingly capable of understanding more abstract concepts and understand what a separation and divorce are. They can absorb more detail, will immediately worry about their own lives, ask probing questions, and think about many of the ramifications of your decision to separate.



## v. What Do Children and Adolescents Need to Know and How Do You Say It?

**T**ell your children that a decision was made to separate, and exactly when that will take place. If you are planning to proceed to divorce, they must hear this also.

For young children say, "Mommy and Daddy are not going to live together in this house anymore. We will each have our own home. Daddy (Mommy) is going to move to another house. He (she) will move out in three days. Today is Wednesday, so on Saturday (that's after three more nights here) he will move his clothes and things and some furniture to his new home. When he moves to his new place, you will spend time with him there, and also be with me in this house."

School aged children and adolescents will need to hear that a decision was made, and when mom/dad will move to another residence. Offer to show them the new apartment or home. If it's appropriate, tell them that maybe they could help mom/dad move a few of their own things to this second home to begin to make it comfortable for them there.

If you are separating temporarily within the family home, you will want to tell them that their parents from now on will be doing most things separately while they take steps to get a divorce. Explain that you will take turns fixing meals or putting the children to bed, taking the children to school or out for movies or other events, or being the "on call" parent.

Tell your children and adolescents that the decision to divorce was not caused by them, and was not in any way their fault. The decision was made by their parents because there were serious problems getting along with and loving each other. Tell them that you were not able to continue to live together and be okay. If you tried counseling, tell them that it did not help you be nicer to each other, or love one another again. See Section VI on "What to Say to your Children about Why You are Separating" for more help about what to say.

**Don't rush.** Allow time for children of all ages to react to this news. Don't try to cut them off because you are uncomfortable. Allow them to cry, to ask, "But why?" or "What's going to happen to me?" Accept the anger that is typical of older youngsters. Don't be defensive. This is a big deal for your children. They can't at this point be "just fine." Tell your youngsters you understand that this is really hard for them. And that you are both very sorry to cause them this pain. You can say it is also hard for you, but keep your focus on the children and their reaction. You may ask them if they have questions they would like to ask.

Reassure them a separation between mom and dad will not separate mom and the children or dad and the children. Tell them that you will *always* be their parents.

Next, tell your children what this separation means for them. This is a very important beginning for coping with future changes. They might be afraid to ask some of these questions themselves. Here is a list of things that most children and adolescents will want you to talk about and about which they will have questions:

- what happens next
- where each of you will live
- where they will live and what will happen to their "stuff"
- whether they will be able to see each parent and for how much time
- whether each of you will continue to love them
- whether it is okay for them to love each of you
- who will care for them, including day care providers
- will they have to change schools
- will they still be able to see their friends
- can they continue in their activities
- will they still be able to see their grandparents or favorite aunt

You may not be able to talk about all of these important things in one sitting, especially with preschool children or those with short attention spans and hyperactivity. They don't have to be handled in this order. If your children are too upset to continue, sit quietly with them, assure them that you can talk more about these things when they are ready. Tell them you are not going anywhere and will be here for them.

Talking to children in this way about the separation is the beginning of a dialogue which will be ongoing if you allow it. Many children go off from this initial discussion and spend some time thinking about things, living with many feelings, and then returning to each of you with clarifying questions as they are ready. Hopefully you will allow and encourage this. In this way, they build a more complex and useful understanding of what has happened, how their life is changing, and whether it is working for them. They may want to give you feedback too, including about the living arrangements you have developed. Allowing this openness will build trust and keep the door open for meaningful communication around many issues in their lives in the future.





## vi. What to Say to Your Children about Why You Are Separating

**M**any children and adolescents will ask why you are divorcing. This is normal. Even if they don't ask, they want to know. Unless there was violence and intense or frequent conflict, they might not have seen signs of marital trouble that would prepare them for divorce. Even if there was anger between their parents freely expressed, children are used to it (but of course didn't like it). Adolescents in particular will often demand an answer, sometimes angrily. They need some information to help them make sense of this family crisis. *What you say and how you say it can have a large emotional impact and be long remembered, so choose your words carefully.*

Will the decision to divorce be presented as a mutual or a unilateral decision? About 20–25% of parents arrive at a mutual decision, sometimes after a few joint therapy sessions. This often makes telling children about separation a bit easier as both parties are typically less angry and see the benefits of a united front.

More likely, one of you wanted this separation and divorce more than the other. This makes it much harder for the parent who feels "rejected" to deal with the separation. Some partners vigorously oppose the decision, and want everyone to know it including the children. Others reluctantly agree that the marriage was very unsatisfactory in many ways but divorce is not what they wanted. If you are in this more unilateral situation, how will each of you handle this? How can you present the separation without blame?

What your children and adolescents have observed of your relationship with your partner may help shape your discussion about the separation. Family research tells us that older children and adolescents are excellent observers of their family life. They can talk knowledgeably about their parents' behaviors and interactions and how their parents treat them.

Think about what your children saw in your home, your relationship, your parenting.

- Did they see high levels of intense conflict and/or violence by one or both of you? High tension? Heated or highly charged emotional reactions to each other including name-calling, refusing to talk to a partner for days, disrespectful treatment.
- Did they observe occasional arguments, but no violence? Was there evidence of any affection between you, or did you live parallel lives, like roommates? Did they see attempts to work differences out, or efforts at cooperation around the children?
- Did they experience an angry, sometimes abusive parenting style of constant criticism and rejection by one or both parents? Or did they experience the love of two parents who provided emotional support and were interested in their lives?

In some instances, what your children and adolescents saw may help them understand why you are divorcing. You can draw selectively on some of that experience. If they watched an alcoholic parent be out of control, or saw both parents' angry arguments spiral into hitting each other, the separation can make a lot more sense for children and adolescents. They are likely to be more accepting, even if sad. It appears to be much harder for children to understand why parents are separating if their parents did not tear each other down or argue and provided solid, loving parenting. They are better equipped to go forward in this next phase of their lives, however, because of your good parenting, provided you both stay involved and minimize conflict.

Children of all ages do not need and should not hear too much detail, and certainly not comments that are inappropriate for children or destructive of their relationship with each of you. Here are some ideas that you may want to use or modify to suit your situation. They reflect some different situations that partners find themselves in. This language is appropriate for those 5–6 years and older.

- We are been very unhappy with each other. We just don't get along. We tried to make things better by talking about our problems and going to a counselor for help. It didn't work. It is hard to stay together when you feel unhappy with your partner all the time. We both decided it was better for us to separate and divorce. When we got married, we loved each other and now we don't. Many things changed. We changed. But we love you dearly and that will never change.
- You've seen us fight. You've heard us shout at each other. You've seen your dad leave the house in anger. You've heard me tell him I hate him. This is a terrible way for adults to behave, and it must have been really hard for you to see this. We are sorry. I decided to get a divorce. Your dad (mom) doesn't want a divorce, and he/she is very upset that I have decided to separate. I understand that. It is sad and hard for everyone.
- You know that your mom went to a special treatment center last year because she was using bad drugs and had trouble taking good care of you. Things were good after that, but then she started using these drugs again. This is not a good thing for families and especially for you. I have decided that we are going to separate, that your mom will move into an apartment and you and I will stay here in the house. This will happen next Saturday. Your mom is very unhappy about this. I hope that mom sees that she has to get drug treatment again, and will become a good mom again.

## VII. Dealing with Your Emotions and Those of Your Children

**A**ngry, sad, unhappy, relieved, anxious, fearful of the future—parents have all or some of these normal feelings. When you talk to your children, try not to frighten them. Take deep breaths and work on staying calm so that you can talk and they can listen. If you are worried about “losing it,” write notes about what you will say. Rage and anger directed at the other parent are toxic for children. Avoid this, even if you feel like blasting the other parent. Do not use this as a forum for punishing a parent.

If you cry, you might say that you are sad that you could not work things out or that you don't love each other in the same way anymore. Or, you can say that you are not happy about the separation, that you didn't want it to happen. Assure them you will be okay. One way to handle your anger is to say that even though you are upset right now at their dad/mom for deciding to divorce, that you will get through this. And you will help them too.

Some very angry parents want their children to hate the other parent and share their sense of injustice and rage. They may say, “Your mother/father doesn't love you...she/he left you...he/she doesn't care about us.” Often such intense anger comes from deep feelings of abandonment, and a parent assumes and wants the children to feel exactly the same way. This is an example of a parent having trouble sorting out his/her own feelings and needs from those of the children. While such parents may feel that having the children reject the other parent and line up on their side is a good thing, there are generally negative long-term consequences for that parent-child relationship as these youngsters move into young adulthood.



Let children develop their own feelings and views about their parents' separation and about each of their parents. If a parent is irresponsible, self-centered, emotionally unstable, or a poor parent, the children will eventually come to realize this on their own.

Avoid asking for and becoming dependent on your children and adolescents for emotional support, advice, solace, and constant companionship. You are asking your children to parent you and abdicating your parental role. Such role reversal, while it may feel good to you, will interfere with your children's emotional and social development because they are devoting their attention and energy to your psychological needs.

When children and adolescents hear that their parents are going to separate and/or divorce, there is no single way that they respond immediately. Some are silent, turning inward with their grief. They most likely will cry. Older youngsters often react with anger, try to identify who is to blame, and may accuse you of ruining their lives (adolescents especially). Others are relieved to hear they won't have to live with conflict and hatred.

As children react to the news of your separation, and in the months ahead, continue to reassure them you love them and their other parent loves them. Tell them again and again that you know this is hard for them and sad, and that you will work hard to make things okay for them. ***Make sure you deliver on that promise.*** One way to do that is to ask how things are going for them every month or so, and whether there is anything you or their other parent can do better. This is most helpful with children about age 6 and up. With children from 3–8, you can read some of the good illustrated books with them about separation or divorce and start a conversation by asking whether they feel the same way as the central character, and how things are going.

Many parents hear from "experts" and the media that children always blame themselves for the separation/divorce. Actually, research indicates that this is not generally true.



- Preschool children often blame themselves because they are in an ego-centric stage of development: they think the world revolves around them, and therefore, they did something to cause the divorce. Some will check this out in the weeks after separation. "Did Daddy leave because I kicked him before?" "Did Mommy go away because she was mad at me when I broke my toy?" Or they may hit their resident parent and then ask if they are going to leave them too. They are testing you and your steadfastness. They are confused about causality and need frequent reassurance that they didn't cause mom or dad to leave the home and live elsewhere.
- Two other groups of children and adolescents are more likely to blame themselves for your separation. These include children who were the focus of most of your angry disputes during your marriage, and those who before the separation had psychological symptoms such as depression, aggression, poor self-esteem, anxiety, and various disabilities. These youngsters will generally benefit from counseling with an experienced therapist who is knowledgeable about the impact of separation and divorce on children.

In the weeks and months after separation, children and adolescents will have a wide range of feelings and disruptive behaviors linked to your separation. Be patient but also admonish them for inappropriate behavior. Discipline them fairly, set firm limits, have appropriate expectations but avoid being rigid and punitive. Be sure to keep your anger under control.

- The most common reactions of toddlers, preschoolers, and kindergarten age children will be sadness and tears, emotional meltdowns, increased hitting and provocative behaviors. They may also experience anxiety about separations that they easily managed before your separation, such as going to day care or nursery school. Reassure them, tell them you are not leaving them, tell them when you or the other parent will pick them up (even if they don't understand time, it is reassuring to hear, "Your mom will come and pick you up this afternoon, after work.")

- Young boys in particular are often very sad and upset that their fathers are not around, and some may be depressed. This is particularly the case if they are only seeing their dad every other weekend. This twelve day wait between contacts is often unbearable and your parenting plan should take this into account. This is of course, also true of many girls who have good relationships with their fathers. The loss of contact and closeness with one of their parents is one of the most common complaints of children and adolescents about parental divorce.
- Older children and adolescents are particularly likely to be angry at one or both of you about the divorce. They may act out, refuse to do their chores, homework or piano practice, or clean up their room. Their grades may suffer. This anger is often covering their sadness and anxiety, which you may not hear about. Sometimes their anger is warranted by a parent's demeaning and spiteful behaviors expressed openly toward the other parent. Some adolescents begin to spend more time at their friends' homes to get away from these destructive behaviors. As high school youngsters are spending a lot of time thinking about their own social relationships, they may still want to blame a parent for the divorce or ask you for more detail about what went wrong. (Sometimes their own assessments are not correct). With these older youngsters, remind them that you know they are angry, that you hope that as their life settles down to its new shape that they will begin to feel better.
- Set firm and fair limits and curfews, expect compliance, and express your expectations that they will do their homework.
- Set aside some time at regular intervals to talk about how things are going and to ask what would make their lives easier or better at this point.

## VIII. Special Circumstances: Violence, Child Abuse, Mental Illness

**P**artner violence is far too common in intimate relationships, and children and adolescents are often frightened if not traumatized by observing or hearing their parents' violence. Sometimes this violence is the result of heated arguments that spiral out of control and one or both parents slap, push or shove the other partner. In this instance, one or both parents need to learn good anger management and conflict resolution skills to avoid repeating this violence in the future. You will need to assess whether it is wise to tell the children together about the separation. It may not be safe, particularly because emotions are so raw at this time and you do not want to ruin your discussion with the children by heated arguing and shoving. Other more severe violence is often perpetrated by just one parent, and may involve extremely controlling behavior and/or extreme jealousy. In relationships with a history of severe violence by one parent and injuries to the other, it is not appropriate or safe for parents to talk with the children together. The parent who has provided the most responsible and protective care for the children should take responsibility for talking to the children. It is critical that all violence cease after separation, which may require a protective order. In families where children and adolescents have been frightened by a parent's violence, and/or were also physically and emotionally abused by this parent, these youngsters may be afraid to spend time alone with the violent parent and may completely resist contact. Special attention to the needs of these youngsters to be safe and reassured is necessary, and may include an assessment and counseling. In some instances where child abuse has emotionally scarred a child, supervised contacts or no contact is likely warranted.

Where there was a history of high conflict but no violence, the separation provides you and your children an opportunity for much needed relief from your frightening and upsetting conflict. All transitions



of the children from one parent to the other should be made in neutral settings where the parents neither see each other nor have any opportunities to start an argument. Separate drop offs and pick ups at school, day care, or sports practices and games are commonly included in parenting plans. Talk to a mediator or counselor about safe communication and contact rules. Continuing high conflict that is expressed in front of or through the children is one of the highest risk factors for damaging your children's adjustment. This is the time to begin emotionally disengaging from a partner and taking charge of your own behavior. Start anew with a family environment that will foster your children's psychological, emotional, and social adjustment.

Parental substance abuse or mental illness are potentially serious threats to children's safety and emotional well-being. Many youngsters will distance themselves from a parent who has been erratic, severely withdrawn, out of control, or episodically raging and violent as a result of substance abuse or some forms of mental illness. These situations need careful assessment and treatment to determine if the child needs protection and whether the parent-child relationship can be restored after the affected parent successfully undergoes treatment.

Depression and high anxiety resulting from a separation are not uncommon. However, severe depression often seriously interferes with routine child care and parents' work patterns. If you have trouble getting out of bed in the morning, or are drinking alcohol to excess, missing work, or not attending to the children's emotional and daily logistical needs, it is important to seek some therapy and begin the process of healing. Look for a counselor or therapist who has experience working with separating parents, and find a group education program for separated parents. Both will be helpful. Parental depression and high anxiety is linked to the development of psychological, social, and academic problems in children, so it is best to take charge of your mental health needs for your own well-being as well as that of your children.

*"Children are  
one third of our population  
and all of our future."*

— SELECT PANEL FOR THE  
PROMOTION OF CHILD HEALTH, 1981



## ix. Resources

### PRESCHOOL BOOKS

1. Brown, Laurene & Marc. 1986. *Dinosaurs Divorce: A Guide for Changing Families*. New York: Little Brown.
2. Lansky, Vicki. 1998. *It's Not Your Fault Koko Bear*. Minnetonka, MN: Book Peddlers.
3. Levins, Sandra & Langdo, Bryan. 2005. *Was It the Chocolate Pudding?: A Story for Little Kids about Divorce*. Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association.
4. Masurel, Clair & Denton, Kady MacDonald. 2003. *Two Homes*. Cambridge Mass: Candlewick.
5. Rogers, Fred. 1998. *Let's Talk About It: Divorce*. New York: G. Putnam & Sons.

### GRADE SCHOOL BOOKS

1. Ford, Annie & Ford, Stephen & Ford, Melanie. 1998. *My Parents Are Divorced, Too: A Book for Kids by Kids*. Washington D.C.: Magination Press.
2. Gallagher, Mary Collins. 2005. *Ginny Morris and Mom's House, Dad's House*. Washington D.C.: Magination Press.
3. Loughhead, Stephen, *Lemons 2 Lemonade: A Program for Children about Divorce*. Active Parenting Publishers. (Workbook and DVD)  
<http://www.divorceandfamilies.com/ccp51/cgi-bin/cp-app.cgi>.
4. Ransom, Jeanie Franz. 2000. *I Don't Want to Talk About It*. Washington D.C.: Magination Press.
5. Ricci, Isolina. 2006. *Mom's House, Dad's House for Kids: Feeling at Home at One Home or Two*. Fireside.
6. Thomas, Shirley & Rankin, Dorothy. 1997. *Divorced But Still My Parents*. Atlas Books.
7. Winchester, Kent. 2001. *What in the World Do You Do When Your Parents Divorce? A Survival Guide for Kids*. Free Spirit Publishing.

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**ADOLESCENT BOOKS**

1. Cassella-Kapusinski, Lynn. 2006. *Now What Do I Do? A Guide to Help Teenagers with Their Parents' Separation or Divorce*. Skokie, IL: ACTA Publications.
2. Kimball, Gayle. 1994. *How to Survive Your Parents' Divorce: Kids' Advice to Kids*. Equality Press.
3. MacGregor, Cynthia. 2004. *The Divorce Handbook for Teens*. Atascadero, CA: Impact Publishers.
4. Trucit, Trudi Strain. 2007. *Surviving Divorce*. Children's Press.

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**BOOKS, SOFTWARE PROGRAMS  
AND OTHER RESOURCES FOR PARENTS**

1. American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers, *Stepping Back From Anger: Protecting Your Children During Divorce* (12 page booklet)  
Available for purchase at [aaml.org](http://aaml.org).
2. American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers, *The Voices of Children During Divorce* (VHS). Available for purchase at [aaml.org](http://aaml.org).
3. Ashley, Steven. 2002. *The Long-Distance Dad: How You Can Be There for Your Child—Whether Divorced, Deployed, or on the Road*. New York: W. W. Norton.
4. Emery, Robert. 2006. *The Truth About Children and Divorce*. New York: Penguin Group.
5. Garber, Benjamin. 2008. *Keeping Kids Out of the Middle: Child-Centered Parenting in the Midst of Conflict, Separation, and Divorce*. HCI.
6. Gold, Lois. 2009. *The Healthy Divorce. Keys to Ending Your Marriage While Preserving Your Emotional Well-Being*. Naperville, IL: Sphinx.
7. Hetherington, E. Mavis & Kelly, John. 2002. *For Better or for Worse: Divorce Reconsidered*. New York: Norton.
8. Lansky, Vicky. 1996. *Vicky Lansky's Divorce Book for Parents*. Minnetonka: MN Book Peddlers.
9. Mercer, Diana & Pruett, Marsha Kline. 2001. *Your Divorce Advisor: A Lawyer and a Psychologist Guide You Through the Legal and Emotional Landscape of Divorce*. Fireside.

**BOOKS, SOFTWARE PROGRAMS  
AND OTHER RESOURCES FOR PARENTS (CONTINUED)**

10. Neuman, Gary. 1999. *Helping Your Kids Cope with Divorce the Sandcastles Way*. New York: Random House.
  11. *Our Family Wizard*. Online tools to help parents communicate, arrange schedules and other family information. [www.ourfamilywizard.com](http://www.ourfamilywizard.com).
  12. Ricci, Isolina. 1997. *Mom's House, Dad's House: Making Two Homes for Your Child*. Fireside.
  13. *Shared Ground*. Parenting scheduling software—to develop parenting plans, and calendar schedules. [www.sharedground.com](http://www.sharedground.com).
  14. Stahl, Philip. 2000. *Parenting After Divorce: A Guide to Resolving Conflicts and Meeting Your Children's Needs*. Atascadero, CA: Impact Publishers.
  15. Trafford, Abigail. 1992. *Crazy Times: Surviving Divorce and Building a New Life*. New York: Harper.
  16. Wallerstein, Judith S. & Kelly, Joan B. 1980. *Surviving the Breakup: How Children and Parents Cope with Divorce*. New York: Basic Books/Perseus.
  17. Warshak, Richard. 2003. *Divorce Poison: Protecting the Parent/Child Bond from a Vindictive Ex*. New York: Harper Paperbacks.
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*"Childhood is a  
short season."*

— HELEN HAYES