

*Start
Making
It
Livable for
Everyone*

*Sponsored by:
Oakland County Circuit Court
Family Division*

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**An educational program for
separating/divorced parents
with minor children**

Sponsored by:
Oakland County Circuit Court
Family Division

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INTRODUCTION

SMILE, Start Making It Livable for Everyone is an education program for separating and/or divorced parents with minor children. It can be used for any parent who is experiencing conflict in co-parenting. Parents who are no longer together may not always recognize their children's needs. It takes time, effort and planning on the part of parents to be able to provide for their children. Parents face many challenges raising children in general. When conflict is added to the mix, parents can slip into a downward emotional spiral. Children depend on parents for stability and reassurance. Parents are role models for their children. How a parent handles their separation and/or divorce will determine how their children will handle it.

SMILE shares important information concerning developmental issues, conflict free zone by understanding the do's and don'ts of co-parenting and to learn how to communicate on a positive level when experiencing conflict.

SMILE introduces the concept of "I messages" as a form of communication. It allows communicating how one feels when issues arise. This process helps parents identify issues and try to resolve such issues with keeping the best interest of the child first and foremost. Each separation, divorce and family situation are unique, readers are encouraged to consult other services available to parents and their children. These include psychological, legal, support groups, mediation, and books or articles relating to divorce and separation.

SMILE is an expression of deep concern for the welfare of families by the Oakland County Circuit Court, Family Division, County Executive, Board of Commissioners, and the Friend of the Court.

WHY IS SMILE IMPORTANT...

- Separation/divorce and conflict are processes over which children have no control. Children should not become victims in these situations.
 - When parents are under stress, it is harder to be in touch with their children's pain and confusion.
 - It takes time, effort, and planning on the part of parents to be able to provide for their children's needs.
 - In the crisis of significant family changes, parents may not recognize their children's needs while they attend to adult problems first.
 - Sometimes separating or divorced parents find that their roles and expectations are undefined and confusing.
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ABOUT DIVORCE & CO-PARENTING

SEPARATION AND DIVORCE BRINGS CHANGE. Every family member must adapt to a new way of living. The more parents know about separation/divorce, the better they can cope with the changes and help their children adjust.

SEPARATION AND DIVORCE IS PAINFUL. Children feel hurt and helpless when parents separate or divorce. They are emotionally attached to both parents, and most children want their parents to stay together. When separation/divorce occurs, children, as well as parents, go through a grieving process which triggers feelings of disbelief, anger, sadness, and depression. Children experience several losses, including the loss of important relationships with family members and friends, changes in environment, loss of traditions established by the intact family, and loss of what the children themselves were like before the breakup of the family.

Parents experience hurt and helplessness from what happened during the adult relationship, events that occurred at the time of separation, and the divorce process. Separation/divorce is an extremely difficult time, and parents tend to blame each other for problems. They sometimes do and say terrible things to each other and are unaware of the negative impact their behavior has on children.

Legal aspects of divorce are easier to deal with than the emotional upheaval of separation/divorce and the feelings that arise from the death of a relationship. Anger, disappointment, hurt, grief, and a desire for revenge are some normal reactions. Emotional turmoil can interfere with the mom and dad roles even though the husband and wife have ended.

HOW CHILDREN COME THROUGH THE SEPARATION AND DIVORCE is due in large measure to the parents' relationship after the separation/divorce and parents' relationships with their children. Parent's attitudes and actions make a big difference in how children adjust to separation/divorce. Parents may not be able to be friends after their adult relationship ends. However, the unfinished business of raising their children can be productive if the parents are civil and business-like in their dealings with each other and promote positive relationships with their children.

CO-PARENTING FROM TWO HOMES

Not all children live in traditional households/families. Parents may not have ever been married, or even lived together. Sometimes families are formed by biology, sometimes by caretaking relationships, and sometimes they are determined by Court orders (such as adoptions, guardianships or third party custodial relationships). Yet both parents have rights to be involved with their children's lives, and more importantly, children have the right (and do best) if they have access to all the adults who love and care for them, even if those adults are in conflict

While this program was originally developed for families going through divorce, there have been many changes in how families come together to raise and provide for children. There are many different paths in which children will be raised by parents (or parental figures) that live in different homes, and how children will travel between those homes. These guidelines apply to any family in this situation, regardless of how the family was formed.

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LOSS AND GRIEF

When a family experiences separation and loss, it may take months or years for feelings and behavior to stabilize. While the grief process in adjusting to the death of a relationship can be different for each family member, parents and children gradually pass through several stages. The stages may occur in any order, and some individuals may deal with the issues more than once.

DENIAL – In the beginning, it may be hard to believe that the divorce/separation is happening. Denial protects against shock. It insulates from fear about the changes in the family unit and the feelings of rejection, loneliness, and depression. Some people react by becoming withdrawn and isolated. Others become highly active to block out the pain. Children may pretend the separation or divorce isn't occurring or act as if it doesn't affect them.

ANGER – Parents realize that needs have not been met in the relationship. Anger is a secondary emotion but surfaces when one cannot identify their underlying emotions. Anger may be directed toward self or others. Children may be angry at either or both parents, themselves, and siblings. They may act out or lash out verbally.

DEPRESSION – Parents have sadness in admitting that the relationship is over. Fear about being alone surfaces. Children fear they will never see a parent or friends again for they feel their family will never be together again. These feelings are draining and make it difficult to think about the future. Children may cry frequently or become withdrawn.

BARGAINING – Parents may have thoughts about ways that the relationship may be saved. A parent may ask the other parent to become involved in counseling, to stop engaging in some behavior or to participate in activities together. Some people may make a deal with themselves to do something they believe will save the marriage or help them overcome the loss of the relationship. Children may promise parents to do chores or be good to try to save the relationship. They may try to reunite their parents.

ACCEPTANCE – In time, adjustment to the changes results in feeling better. Anger, grief, and guilt dissolve, and focus on the future becomes possible. Life is more stable, and hope emerges.

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HOW CHILDREN RESPOND TO SEPARATION/DIVORCE

Loss is painful for children. The effects of a family separating/divorcing vary with children's ages. The effects also depend on the circumstances surrounding the separation/divorce. How your child was doing before the separation/divorce, the kind of help adults are giving, the relationship between you and the other parent and other factors affect your child's reactions. While every child is different and may react in different ways to separation/divorce, there are some common reactions by age group and responses from parents that may be helpful.

BABIES AND TODDLERS

Children in this age group live in a small world mostly made up of parents and family. They sense the emotional turmoil or distractedness of their parents and are upset by disruptions in their routine and lapses in their care due to their parents' distress.

Common Reactions

Babies and toddlers may react with crying and fretfulness or they may be listless and unresponsive. They may exhibit sleeping, eating, and digestive problems. Parents may see delays in the baby learning new behaviors or a return to former patterns of behavior as a way of relieving anxiety. Some children in this age group may react with clingy behaviors and be afraid of being separated from you. There may be an increase in your toddler's temper tantrums, and your child may be confused and sad.

Helpful Responses

- Talk to, play with, hold, and cuddle your child.
- Maintain routines and provide predictability and familiarity.
- Make changes slowly and at a rate to which your child can adjust.
- Establish one primary home and minimize the number of caretakers.
- Accept your child's fears and allow the return to earlier levels of functioning.
- Give assurances and answer questions simply, sometimes over and over.
- Promote close, consistent contact with both parents.



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Three to Five Year Olds

This age group is greatly affected by their parents' separation/divorce. They have difficulty understanding what is happening to their family. Pre-schoolers are vulnerable because they aren't reality based and don't have some of the supports older children have.

Common Reactions

Pre-schoolers have a fear of abandonment and even routine separations can become traumatic. They may have bad dreams and demand to sleep with you. Children in this age group believe the world revolves around them, and they may think they caused the separation/divorce and feel guilty. Pre-schoolers may return to earlier levels of functioning, and they may have to have their security needs met through a greater reliance on or a return to security blankets, stuffed animals, or thumb sucking. This age tries to convince themselves through denial everything is OK, but their overwhelming anxiety may be expressed through irritability, clinging, whining, increased aggressiveness, and temper tantrums. Parents may also witness a loss of cheerfulness and curiosity in their child. Pre-schoolers may fantasize the absent parent will return or that parents will reunite.

Helpful Responses

- Reassure your child of your love and support.
 - Correct any misconception your child may have about causing the separation or divorce by giving simple, truthful, but age appropriate reasons for the changes and reassurance it is not your child's fault.
 - Accept your child's return to earlier levels of behaviors and recognize as security increases, the regression will decrease.
 - Promote peaceful, cooperative co-parenting because children in this age group react very strongly to parental conflict. This is especially true at transitions and other places where both parents are present.
 - Be tolerant of temper tantrums and use the opportunity to teach your child how to express anger appropriately.
 - Empathize with your child's wish to have you back together and let them know reconciliation is not going to happen and any behaviors by your child will not cause it to happen.
 - Let your child know you are sad about the problems that separation/divorce causes to help your child feel less isolated and alone in their distress.
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Six to Eight Year Olds

Children in this age group keenly feel the losses separation/divorce brings. They may be grief-stricken, show depression, and yearn intensely for the parent who has left their daily life. They feel the loss of security of their family structure at a time when they have begun to engage in formal learning and take risks with relationships outside the home.

Common Reactions

Six to eight-years old experience a pervasive sadness often exhibited by crying and sobbing. They find it difficult to concentrate in school or to relate to their playmates. It is hard for them to find ways to distract themselves from their grief. They may withdraw or participate in activities with little enthusiasm. Children in this age group have fears of abandonment and rejection and may feel they will be replaced by another child or they will lose contact with their parent(s). They feel deprived both parents are not there for them daily, and this feeling leads to fears of being deprived of food, toys, and other items. They have conflicts of loyalty and feel pulled in two directions by their parents' separation. Their anger at their parents is usually expressed indirectly by fighting with their peers and siblings, refusing to do homework and chores, or resisting routines, such as going to bed, daycare, etc.

Helpful Responses

- Give your child time to mourn the losses and offer extra love and support.
 - Let your child know most children want their parents to reconcile and gently explain you will not be getting back together.
 - Accept children will be sad and angry and acknowledge their feelings.
 - Be available and let your child know it is OK to talk about what is happening.
 - Help your child find healthy outlets for expressing their feelings, through drawing, keeping a journal, talking, and physical activity.
 - Establish consistent routines and plan “special” times to give extra attention.
 - Keep your child away from parental conflicts and negative comments about the other parent.
 - Let your child know that it’s OK to love both parents.
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Nine to Twelve Year Olds

Intense anger is the most distinguishing reaction to separation/divorce for children in this age group. Children direct their anger at one or both parents, and the target is usually whomever they blame for the divorce. Their anger also may be an attempt to cover their feelings of sadness and helplessness. They may feel a need to take care of the parent they have identified as the one who is more needy or lonely.

Common Reactions

The anger this age group feels is fully conscious and usually greater than felt by other age groups. They believe parents could stay together if they tried hard enough to resolve their differences. They may think their parents don't care about their needs. Children of this age may align with one parent over the other, and they usually side with the parent they perceive to be more hurt. The separation and changes in their lives makes them feel rejected, powerless, and hurt. Nine to twelve-years old often react to their distress with physical complaints such as headaches or stomachaches. They are outraged by their parents' behavior and feel shame. Children in this age group may refuse to talk about the separation/divorce and may withdraw from friends and activities.

Helpful Responses

- Show understanding of your child's anger to help diminish its intensity.
- Solicit reasons for the anger to resolve issues beyond the divorce itself, e.g., not enough attention from you, resentment about new responsibilities, and not being able to see former friends.
- Stop destructive behavior and assist your child to find acceptable outlets for the anger, including drawing, writing, warm baths, sports, listening to music, and talking.
- Do not fuel your child's anger toward the other parent by allowing your child to be your ally if you are angry or bitter toward that parent. Recognize if you are too reactive and upset to address your child's concerns about the other parent and find someone who can be more objective (friend, relative, or professional, such as a counselor).
- Deal with your child's physical complaints by explaining it is normal for the body to respond to stress this way and help them find and practice ways to relieve their anxiety.
- Let them know although the situation is difficult for all of you, it will get better.
- Stress the strengths and positive qualities of the other parent because your child's self-concept depends on the parental images of each of you.
- Provide firm and consistent parenting with clear expectations and limits for behavior to minimize your child's attempt to overcome feelings of powerlessness by manipulating, bullying, demanding, disobeying, or being too good.



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Thirteen to Eighteen Year Olds

Even though teenagers are becoming increasingly independent and have support systems outside the family, they are deeply affected by the separation/divorce. The way they distance themselves from their families and achieve independence is an important factor in why the impact of separation/divorce can be so great. Some adolescents feel hurried to achieve their independence and may separate too soon emotionally or feel so vulnerable they regress into less mature behaviors, making it harder for them to become independent.

Common Reactions

Adolescents feel a deep sense of loss and sadness when parents separate/divorce. They have feelings of emptiness and have chronic fatigue and difficulty concentrating. They become preoccupied with the survival of their own relationships and examine their values and concepts about a good marriage/adult relationship because of the fear that the ending of their parents' relationship may foreshadow their own experiences. They feel shame and embarrassment about the separation/divorce, and these feelings intensify when a parent begins dating. Teenagers may withdraw from parents and family to provide themselves distance from the crisis at home. They may level verbal accusations at parents and feel they were let down because parents didn't make the adult relationship work. Adolescents may use alcohol, drugs, sexual activity, delinquent behavior, and school failure to test their values and parents' concern for them. A loyalty dilemma may arise because of a need to side with one parent. Teenagers worry about money and have concerns about their financial needs and security.

Helpful Responses

- Let teenagers distance themselves to cope with the separation/divorce while letting them know you are monitoring their activities and maintaining curfews and house rules.
 - Provide a safe-haven so teens, in their quest for independence, can move away by taking several steps forward and then temporarily move back to the security of the family.
 - Do not overburden your child with many new responsibilities but maintain expectations at the level they have already experienced.
 - Be available to talk with your teen and show you care.
 - Let teenagers know it is okay to love both parents and they don't have to choose sides.
 - Encourage children to participate in their usual activities or engage in new ones.
 - Respect their developmental need for involvement with peers and independent activities and recognize teenagers don't need or want extended time with either parent.
 - Keep adolescents out of the middle of your conflicts with the other parent.
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HELPING CHILDREN MAKE A POSITIVE ADJUSTMENT

Emotional and behavioral changes are to be expected when separation/divorce occurs. Gradually, these changes tend to subside. If, however, the symptoms are intense, continue for several months, or interfere greatly in your child's life, your child may require counseling to prevent long lasting emotional difficulties and promote healthy adjustment.

The most critical factors in helping children make a positive adjustment to separation/divorce are:

1. Children have an ongoing relationship with both parents
 2. Parents stop fighting and resolve or minimize their conflict
 3. Children have a close and nurturing relationship with at least one of their parents.
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REBUILDING FAMILIES

Parents face many changes and challenges when they separate/divorce. As an individual, you are confronted with many issues and problems at a time when you are going through deep and conflicting emotions. There are, however, things you can do and pitfalls you can avoid so you and your children can survive this difficult time and adjust in healthy and positive ways.

DO'S AND DON'TS TO HELP YOURSELF

Separation/divorce may result in new situations and problems for which you may not have solutions. You may feel lonely and isolated and no longer have interest in activities you used to enjoy. Different and increased responsibilities may be overwhelming. You may feel there is little hope for the future. It is important you take steps to maintain your wellbeing and balance, so you can meet your child's needs.

DO...

- Stay connected to family and friends with visits, phone calls and by making plans. Appropriate adult emotional support is vital to your wellbeing.
- Develop new hobbies or interests; take classes, do volunteer work, join organizations, exercise. Stay vital!
- Seek out a support group or go to counseling.
- Ask for assistance from friends and family with childcare and other chores.
- Recognize there will be times when nothing seems to be going right, but remember things usually get better.
- Approach single parenting with a positive attitude and speak encouragingly about the future. Children need to know you are strong and going to take care of them.



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DON'T...

- Don't allow yourself to slip into a downward emotional spiral. Your child is looking to you for stability and reassurance. Get help in managing overwhelming emotions.
- Don't expose children to casual dating relationships. Children need all their energies to recover from the separation/divorce and will likely be overwhelmed if they are forced to integrate a new person into their lives before they are ready. A good rule of thumb is to wait at least one year after the separation/divorce has occurred before engaging in significant dating. Both you and your children need a little time to grieve and process the changes going on.
- Don't rush it if you have a significant other person who is likely to become your new partner. Go slow and watch your children for signs of readiness to accept someone new in their life.
- Don't use your children as emotional supports. You will overburden them with your adult needs. They are too emotionally immature to help you and they need YOU to be supporting them, not the other way around.

Recovering from the pain and anger that separation/divorce brings is not easy. The following guidelines will ease your adjustment and contribute to your child's wellbeing.

DO...

- Resolve your feelings about the other parent. Be able to separate those feelings about your ex as a spouse/significant other from your knowledge of your ex as your child's parent.
- Keep in mind for optimal emotional, psychological, and social growth, a child needs both parents to form a healthy identity. Keep your personal feelings about your ex from interfering with what your child needs to receive from the other parent.
- Treat the other parent with respect; be civil and business-like in your dealings.

DON'T...

- Don't disparage the other parent to your children. Your children build their identity from both parents. When you put down a child's mother or father, the child internalizes negative images. If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all!
- Don't be led to believe your children are better off without you or it is better if your children seek you out when they get older. Your child will very likely feel abandoned and be left wondering what could have been done to make you remain involved.
- Social media can be a form of support. But take care and be aware of the vast potential audience. Assume your co-parent is likely to gain access to anything you post. Don't post about kids if your co-parent objects.



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DO'S AND DON'TS TO HELP YOUR CHILDREN

When parents separate/divorce, a child's world goes topsy-turvy. Children can be easily overwhelmed by the losses and changes in their lives. They need time and help from both parents to be able to thrive, accomplish, and recover. There are many things you can do to help your children cope and adjust to the separation/divorce.

DO...

- Listen to your child's worries and concerns. Look for signs that your child is ready to talk. When your child wants to talk with you, stop what you are doing and give your full attention. Validate your child's feelings and answer questions honestly. Your child doesn't need the intimate details about the ending of the relationship but does need to have a reason for the separation/divorce that gives an understanding of why it is happening. If your child asks you about something you can't answer, say so, but reassure your child it will be worked out.
- Speak hopefully about the future. Children need to know they will be taken care of and continue to be loved by both parents. They need to be reassured they are not to blame for the separation/divorce.
- Let children know, sometimes repeatedly, how they will be affected by the separation/divorce, including what changes will take place and what will stay the same. They need to know where they will live, go to school, and when they will see their other parent, extended family members, and friends.
- Plan a parenting time schedule so your children have the predictability they need in their lives. Children tend to become anxious and irritable when there is no predictability to their daily routine.
- Adhere to the times set for parenting time exchanges. Being late disrupts children's routines and does not set a good example for your children.
- Consider everyone's schedule and activities, including those of each child, when making a parenting time plan. To best serve the needs of children, plans should include frequent and regular contact with both parents and be modified to meet the changing needs of children.
- Use social media wisely. It is a great tool to connect with your children outside of physical parenting time, and even over great distances. Be sure to have an agreement with your co-parent about age appropriate rules for children's access to social media. And again, be mindful of what you post! Your co-parent, and even you children are likely to see or hear about what you say.





DON'T...

- Don't be inflexible when it comes to special family occasions or important functions involving your child that may necessitate a parenting time adjustment. Children need to continue to feel a part of their extended families and to participate in their activities.
- Don't interrogate your child about the other parent or what went on during their time with the other parent. Be willing to listen if your child wants to talk and allow your child to express their feelings for the other parent.
- Don't let your work or other circumstances keep you from being in contact with your children. Write, phone, text, e-mail, fax, send cards and explore other ways to let your children know you are thinking about them even while you are away.
- Don't use exchange times as opportunities to fight with the other parent. Handle transitions in a calm, matter of fact manner. If you can't manage your emotions, make other arrangements so you and the other parent will not expose your children to your arguments.
- Don't use social media to vent about your co-parent. Even if you have "blocked" your co-parent, there are often enough connections you should assume they will become aware of what you have said. As these are most often permanent records, this can be very detrimental to the business of co-parenting and can become documentation of your own poor behavior and choices. In addition, children are often more technologically savvy than their parents and may surprise you by getting access to the things you say on social media, which could then become a problem in the parent-child relationships.

Emotions run high during separation/divorce. When children are exposed to parental conflict they can become anxious and begin to act out or become depressed and withdrawn. If parental conflict becomes chronic and does not resolve over time, studies show behavioral problems and mood disorders are likely to occur in children exposed to these conditions. When these children become adults themselves, they are likely to have great difficulty forming healthy relationships.

DO...

- Talk directly to each other about child-related matters. If talking isn't possible because of conflict, communicate in writing.
- Encourage your child to settle differences with the other parent.
- Encourage your children to follow the rules of both households even if the rules are different. Children are quite accustomed to different places having different rules. For example, children know it's permissible to shout out loud at a sporting event, but not in a library.
- Arrange to discuss conflicts about parenting at times when the children are in school or fast asleep, so they do not overhear you.





DON'T...

DON'T PUT YOUR CHILDREN IN THE MIDDLE!!!!

- Don't argue in front of your children. When you do, you place them in an anxious situation which they can't control.
- Don't expect your children to take sides.
- DO NOT refuse financial or emotional support to your children to get back at the other parent.
- Don't jump to conclusions before getting all the correct information.
- Don't allow past conflicts to interfere with decisions about your children.
- Don't use your children as messengers to convey angry feelings towards your ex or have them "spy" for you about your ex's life.
- Don't pass messages or information about parenting time schedules through the children. Children will not remember to share or tell the other parent; however, when you tell a child not to tell they sometimes do!

REMEMBER: As you and your children move through the process of separation/divorce and adjustment to the changes in your lives, your children are looking to you to guide them to "safe ground." You are their role model. How you handle this separation/divorce may well determine how they will learn to handle other problems in life. Will they see parents who model cooperation and civility in solving problems or will they see two people who tumble, kicking and screaming, into every pitfall? Following these "do's" and "don'ts" helps you give your children a better chance to come through this loss learning that life goes on and people can adjust to change.

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CO-PARENTING TIPS

Though divorce has ended a marriage, separation ends a relationship, parenting remains. Children will begin to adjust and heal more readily after the trauma of separation/divorce if cooperative parenting is established.

After separation/divorce, parents are responsible for the care and maintenance of the children. Parenting time is either defined by an order of the court or is agreed upon by both parents. Co-parenting may seem to complicate an already stressful situation. Parents may find their roles and expectations are undefined and cloudy. It takes time, effort, and planning on the part of the parents to be able to provide a safe environment that helps children recover from the separation/divorce and feel good about themselves. Following are some guidelines and suggestions to facilitate co-parenting.

BEING CONSISTENT It is crucial parents are regular and consistent when exercising their parenting time. Children need to know they will be made available for parenting time and picked up and returned at scheduled times. If an emergency arises that requires a change in time or if parenting time will not be exercised, each parent has the responsibility of notifying the other parent as far in advance as possible.

The children should be supplied with adequate clothing for the parenting time, and the clothing is to be returned at the end of the parenting time. If the children are on medication, the medication, the dosage, and the times the medication is to be taken should be made available to the parent. Any information which pertains to the welfare of the children should be shared by parents.

GOING BETWEEN HOUSEHOLDS Children may complain, become withdrawn, or act out when it is time to go between the parents' homes. A parent may believe something negative is happening in the other parent's home because of the children's behavior. This behavior is usually normal and not necessarily an indication anything is wrong. Children may be involved in an activity they don't want to interrupt. Children miss the parent they are not with and go through an adjustment when getting ready to leave each parent's home. Whatever the issue might be it is important to share this information with the other parent. Each parent needs to convey the same message of safety, importance of the parent/child relationship and everything will or is okay.

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REBUILDING TRUST It is essential separated/divorced parents make efforts to rebuild trust between them. Having a degree of trust helps reduce conflicts. One way to rebuild trust is to honor agreements made between parents. Broken agreements result in anger, disappointment, resentment and retaliation. Parents should tell each other the truth. If plans need to be changed or something of concern happens during the children are with a parent, the situation should be discussed calmly with the other parent. A parent should check out children’s stories with the other parent and recognize children are not always accurate in their portrayal of events

SHARING AND PARTICIPATING IN ACTIVITIES Because of the newness of the separation/divorce and the changes in roles, it is helpful to outline a list of specific activities for the parenting time. Choose activities appropriate to children’s ages and interest. Reading books together, picnics, walks, biking, cooking, games and trips to parks, the zoo, museum and the library are some activities. Parents may have skills to pass along to their children. Working on the car, computer or sewing machine assists children to grow in skills and independence and share in an activity the parents enjoys. A parent’s role does not necessarily begin and end with scheduled parenting time. The parent also may participate in parent/teacher conferences, attend school functions, help children with homework, or assist in taking the children to medical appointments and their social or sports activities. Participating and sharing in activities allows parents to remain involved with their children. However, both parents need to establish “normal” routines with chores, bedtimes, rules and standards for behavior and regular meals to help children feel secure and stable.

SOLVING PROBLEMS Parents need to communicate about parenting. When problems arise, the first impulse may be to blame the other parent. Anger and blaming are barriers that interfere with communication. Communication requires special skills and compromise. When there is a problem, parents need a plan and to be flexible.

I-MESSAGES

A helpful tool in communicating is the use of “I-messages”. All this means is taking care to frame your statements in terms of your own experiences instead of making demands of the other person or telling them how they feel. It is especially helpful in co-parenting if you also keep focused on the impact of your concern or request ON YOUR CHILDREN. There is a format for this strategy in which the speaker identifies a specific behavior of the other person then states how that makes them feel. Statements go something like this: “I feel frustrated when you show up late for parenting time, and the kids get anxious and stressed out.” You can then make a request or suggestion, “Please make every effort to be there on time. Or do we need to make changes to the time, so it works better for all of us?” A good rule of thumb is to catch yourself when you start sentences with “You” (“You never show up on time!”) and replace it with an “I” statement instead.





FIRST, ASK YOURSELF:

Is this a child-related problem?

Bringing up problems that deal with separation or divorce issues of the parents are not part of the business of co-parenting.

Does this problem have to do with the children’s health, education, or parenting time? Separated/divorced parents may have to limit discussions to these three topics. As co-parents, you do not have control over the other parent, their time or parenting styles.

Is a change in the parenting time schedule convenient for me only or does it accommodate the other parent or the children? As with anything in life, schedule changes, personal, work and/or school commitments change, weather changes therefore, it is important to be open, flexible and to compromise.

Can the problem wait or does it need to be discussed as soon as possible?

Make a list of the issues to be discussed and your proposals. Let it sit for a few days to see if you have any changes or need more information before arranging a meeting.

WHEN PARENTS MEET FOR PROBLEM SOLVING:

Arrange a time and place that is convenient for both parents.

Limit discussion time to 30 minutes. When discussion time goes longer, emotions may get out of hand.

Only cover a few issues in one session. Start with the easy problem and move on to the more difficult.

Be specific about what you mean. Set ground rules that there will be no personal attacks or name calling.

If you disagree, look for ways each parent can give a little.

Write down any agreements you make and make sure each of you has a copy.

Once a decision is made, put it away and don’t try to re-think or renegotiate it.



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GAMES PARENTS PLAY – NOBODY WINS

Separation/divorce is painful, and people who are hurting often act in ways that hurt other people. They may play “divorce games” in which they attempt to use or manipulate someone to gain control over their lives. The games aren’t fun and they’re not good for anyone involved. The games are usually not intentional – they sort of just happen unless one recognizes them and avoids them.

In the beginning of the separation/divorce, people may actually “win” at one or two of the games. They then feel they got something out of the mess and have control over the situation. However, divorce games result in the players feeling guilty, untrustworthy, and depressed, and children are hurt. **No one wins when playing these kinds of games.**

GAMES PARENTS PLAY

I SPY

A parent sometimes asks a child a lot of questions about what’s going on in the other parent’s home – questions about whether mom or dad has a boyfriend/girlfriend is spending the night, if mom or dad is drinking or using drugs, if mom/dad asked questions about him or her. Sometimes the questions are to satisfy curiosity, but sometimes they are to hurt the other parent or to hurt the parent asking the questions. Sometimes the questions are to help a parent feel better about himself or herself – that the other parent is not doing OK without the relationship.

Enlisting children to play this game complicates and confuses the relationships they have with both parents and is damaging to their emotional well-being.

TUG OF WAR

Parents sometimes continue their conflicts after separation/divorce. Both look for support for their position because then parents can assure themselves they are “right” and “okay” because the child is on their side.

Children are caught in the middle and feel as though they are being ripped apart. Children usually lose respect for both parents and themselves because children are a part of both parents.





MESSENGER

Warring parents can't stand to talk to each other and sometimes don't want to take the chance of making the other parent angry. So they ask children to take little messages to the other parent – “you are two weeks behind in child support and when are you going to pay”; “the house is still half mine and you better make sure the furnace is repaired”; “if I don't get Christmas this year, I won't pay child support.”

Children should not be involved in parent's fights. Children need to love both parents because it makes them feel better about themselves.

WHAT WOULD I DO WITHOUT YOU

When parents separate/divorce, they become overwhelmed and feel less than whole. They feel alone and miss the companionship and help with responsibilities that were part of the marriage/adult relationship. They may count on children to fill the gap and look to children for emotional support or to be the little mother or man of the house.

Children feel used when thrust into the role of being the parent's friend or helpmate. They often must grow up before they are ready and miss out on being children.

THE MONEY GAME

Parents often have a financial crunch when they become single parents. They sometimes let children know how worried they are when bills come due to are overdue. They blame the other parent for their money problems.

This behavior scares children and makes them feel insecure. They may become preoccupied with thoughts about how they can bring money into the home or they may think that if they aren't there, the parent will be able to cope.

I'M STARTING OVER

Sometimes separation/divorce makes parents feel they are starting over and they are young again. They may adopt clothing or hair styles of teenagers. They may stay out late or not come home until morning.

Children find it embarrassing and confusing when parents act like “one of the kids”.





I OWE MY KID

Parents know separation/divorce hurts children, and they feel guilty. Some try to make it up to the children by letting them off the hook with chores and responsibilities or by buying the children wonderful presents, sometimes going without things themselves to do it.

Children know when parents are trying to buy their love. It makes them feel uncomfortable. Children need the consistency of still having to do their regularly assigned chores, and they need love and attention.

OVER MY DEAD BODY

Sometimes parents play custody and parenting time games. They try to get even with the other parent for some hurt that occurred in the relationship or caused the relationship to end. They try to keep the children from the other parent or they try to gain custody to break the other parent financially through court battles, to show they are the better parent, or to intimidate the other parent to gain something else.

Children feel at fault in these games; if they weren't around, they wouldn't be a vehicle for the parents to continue to fight. They believe their feelings don't matter because the parents are so consumed with fighting the war.

NAME CALLING

A parent sometimes calls the other parent names or says nasty things about the other parent in the hearing of the children. The parent is hurt or angry and may even believe the children should know the "truth" about the other parent.

Children don't feel good about themselves when part of themselves comes from the "no good" parent. Children need to learn for themselves the strengths and shortfalls of each parent. They want and need a good relationship with both parents.

GUIDED MISSILE

A parent may try to use children as a weapon to change the other parent's behavior or to try to get something from the other parent. The parent may refuse to pay child support because of the belief the other parent is using it for entertainment or new clothes. The parent may refuse parenting time because a new girlfriend/boyfriend is in the life of the other parent and that parent is now immoral or not giving enough time to the children.

This behavior is unfair to children. Children should not be used as a pawn for a parent to retaliate against the other parent.





GAMES CHILDREN PLAY

I’LL BE ON YOUR SIDE IF YOU GIVE ME WHAT I WANT

Children sometimes tell a parent what the other parent has given them or the places the other parent has taken them to try to gain similar advantages from that parent. Children sometimes tell a parent the grievances they have about the other parent to make that parent play into their hands.

Parents need to realize children are not always accurate reporters and they do try to manipulate situations to their advantage.

BUT MOM (OR DAD) SAID YES

This game also is played by children to get their own way at the expense of one of the parents. Children know the kinds of events or activities one parent may allow but not the other. This game particularly works well if the parent who allows the activity is outside the home. The children enlist that parent’s support and if the other parent says “no,” children drop the bombshell – “but mom/dad said it would be OK”. This also works when parents have different rules or responsibilities for the children.

If possible, divorced parents should continue to try to present a united front to children and try to determine the position the other parent may take. Children need to know while each parent may have different rules, the rules of the household in which they are residing when an issue arises should be followed.

BLACKMAIL

Children may try to manipulate a parent when they are feeling threatened by change or want their own way. Children may tell a parent they won’t visit, or they will go and live with the other parent if the parent has a new girlfriend/boyfriend, is going to remarry, tells the children they can’t do something, or disciplines the children.

If this game is not brought to a halt, children gain power over the parent. Children need to understand there are rules and consequences for broken rules and parents have to get on with their lives too.

I’LL GET EVEN WITH YOU

Children rarely understand the motivation and consequences for this game as they do for the games they play to manipulate their parents. Children sometimes unconsciously or unintentionally display hurt and anger by acting differently from ways they behaved before. Some children may be withdrawn or act violently toward themselves or others. Sometimes the child at home may be different from the at-school child. This can feel like they are trying to make their parents suffer, and in a way, they are, as they try to make sense of the changes in their lives.

Parents who are understanding and have good communication with children may be able to address the problems and help children resolve the feelings of hurt and anger. Some children may need professional help and should be involved in counseling.



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CONCLUSION

When children are asked what they want to see happen after their parents separate/divorce, they tend to answer they would like their parents back together again. When parents are asked the same question, most respond they want nothing to do with their former spouse.

The adjustments required in post-divorce relationships and other separate co-parenting relationships are never easy, for separation and divorce is one of life's most stressful events for everyone involved. Children are often devastated by the losses and change in their lives and feel powerless. Typically, they experience tremendous grief and pain. They have been dependent on both parents, and the props have been knocked out from under them. They feel disbelief the family will no longer exist as they have known it. Many are anxious, angry, sad, depressed, and confused about what is happening. They feel abandoned, and they suffer a drop-in self-esteem.

Just when children need them most, many newly-divorced parents need time for themselves to regain a sense of balance and personal well being. If grieving parents lost their ability to consider their children's needs, everyone suffers. It is hard enough to raise children when parents are together and getting along well; it is much more difficult when children whose parents live in separate houses are having problems talking with each other. It is critical co-parents create a conflict-free zone for their children to develop their sense of continuity and safety and to minimize the negative effects of loss and change in their lives.

Children do best when they have **both** parents involved in their lives, and parents must do what they can to promote those relationships. Children desperately need parental cooperation. Parents **can** learn to get along after divorce and share responsibilities for their children even if they did not get along in their adult romantic relationship. A business partnership can be formed out of the ashes of that relationship, allowing parents to tend to this most challenging and rewarding investment of their lives. Parents or children who have great difficulty coping with the changes in their lives should seek professional help. Hopefully, the information in this booklet will serve as a guide to raising secure and healthy children after divorce.

Please note this material may not apply to certain situations. When there is neglect or abuse, domestic violence and/or substance abuse, safety concerns may require that special arrangements are made to communicate as co-parents, transfer children between homes or even what the parenting schedule will look like. In these situations, it is important to consult with outside resources, including child protection agencies, domestic violence specialists and other community agencies, as well as attorneys and Court personnel.



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CHILDREN'S BILL OF RIGHTS

1. The right to be treated as important human beings, with unique feelings, ideas and desires, and not a source of argument between parents.
 2. The right to a continuing relationship with both parents and the freedom to receive love from and express love for both.
 3. The right to express love and affection for each parent without having to stifle that love because of fear of disapproval by the other parent.
 4. The right to know that their parents' decision to divorce is not their responsibility and that they will continue to be loved by both parents.
 5. The right to continuing care and guidance from both parents.
 6. The right to honest answers to questions about the changing family relationships.
 7. The right to know and appreciate what is good in each parent without one parent degrading the other.
 8. The right to have a relaxed, secure relationship with both parents without being placed in a position to manipulate one parent against the other.
 9. The right to have both parents not undermine the other parent's time with the children by suggesting tempting alternatives or by threatening to withhold parental contact as a punishment for the children's wrongdoing.
 10. The right to experience regular and consistent contact with both parents and to be protected from parental disputes or disagreements.
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SUGGESTED READINGS

FOR FAMILIES:

CHANGING FAMILIES: A GUIDE FOR KIDS AND GROWN-UPS

by David Fassler, M.D., Michele Lash, M.Ed., A.T.R., and Sally B. Ives, Ph.D.

DIVORCE HAPPENS TO THE NICEST KIDS *by Michael S. Prokop, M.Ed.*

THE DIVORCE WORKBOOK: A GUIDE FOR KIDS AND FAMILIES

by Sally Blakeslee Ives, Ph.D.

FOR BETTER, FOR WORSE: A GUIDE TO SURVIVING DIVORCE FOR PRETEENS AND THEIR FAMILIES *by Janet Bode.*

OUR FAMILY IS DIVORCING: A READ-ALOUD BOOK FOR FAMILIES EXPERIENCING DIVORCE *by Patricia Polin Johnson.*

FOR PRE-SCHOOL AND EARLY ELEMENTARY (AGES 3-7):

THE DINOSAUR'S DIVORCE *by L. and M. Brown*

I DON'T WANT TO TALK ABOUT IT *by Jeanie Franz Ransom.*

I LIVE WITH DADDY *by Judith Vigna.*

IT'S NOT YOUR FAULT, KOKO BEAR: A READ TOGETHER BOOK FOR PARENTS AND YOUNG CHILDREN DURING DIVORCE *by Vicki Lansky.*

TOTS ARE NONDIVORCEABLE *by Sara Bonkowski, Ph.D.*

TWO HOMES *by Claire Masurel.*

FOR MIDDLE AND LATER ELEMENTARY (AGES 8-12):

THE BOYS AND GIRLS BOOK ABOUT DIVORCE *by Richard Gardner, M.D.*

THE DIVORCE HELPBOOK FOR KIDS *by Cynthia MacGregor.*

IT'S NOT THE END OF THE WORLD *by Judy Blume.*



KIDS ARE NONDIVORCEABLE *by Sara Bonkowski, Ph.D.*

WHAT CHILDREN NEED TO KNOW WHEN PARENTS GET DIVORCED
by William L. Coleman.

FOR ADOLESCENTS (AGES 13+):

HOW TO SURVIVE YOUR PARENTS DIVORCE: KIDS' ADVICE TO KIDS *by Gayle Kimball.*

TEENS AND DIVORCE *by Gail B. Stewart.*

TEENS ARE NONDIVORCEABLE *by Sara Bonkowski, Ph.D.*

TEENS WITH SINGLE PARENTS: WHY ME? *by Margaret A. Shultz.*

YOU AND YOUR PARENTS' DIVORCE *by Katherine E. Krohn.*

FOR PARENTS:

CRAZY TIMES: SURVIVING DIVORCE AND BUILDING A NEW LIFE *by Abigail Trafford.*

DIFFICULT QUESTIONS KIDS ASK (AND ARE TOO AFRAID TO ASK) ABOUT DIVORCE
by Meg F. Schneider.

FAMILIES APART: TEN KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL CO-PARENTING *by Melinda Blau.*

GROWING UP DIVORCED *by Linda Bird Francke.*

HELPING CHILDREN SURVIVE DIVORCE *by Archibald D. Hart.*

HELPING YOUR CHILD THROUGH YOUR DIVORCE *by Florence Bienenfeld.*

MOM'S HOUSE, DAD'S HOUSE: MAKING TWO HOMES FOR YOUR CHILD *by Isolina Ricci.*

THE PARENTS BOOK ABOUT DIVORCE *by Richard Gardner, M.D.*

VICKI LANSKY'S DIVORCE BOOK FOR PARENTS: HELPING YOUR CHILDREN COPE WITH
DIVORCE AND ITS AFTERMATH *by Vicki Lansky.*

