

# Solutions

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NEWSLETTER

Issue 21

## PARENTING Through Divorce and Separation

Children tend to do best after separation and divorce when both parents remain involved in their lives. Unless the child's safety is threatened (in the case of abusive relationships) parents should ensure that children can maintain relationships with both parents. This is best achieved by building a cooperative parenting relationship.

### Building a Cooperative Parenting Relationship

If possible, parents should work together and share responsibility for their children's care.

Remember: you divorce your partner, not your children. Your spousal relationship has ended, but your parental relationship continues. It is in everyone's best interest to make the parenting relationship work, but it is especially important for your children.

### Develop a Parenting Plan

It is rare that parents make formal plans for their children's future when the situation is normal. Plans evolve, day by day, month by month and year by year as the need arises. But when parents separate, the social, medical and educational needs have to be spelled out in great detail. Who is going to do what and when? Who will pay for the various expenses that come with child rearing? How will time be shared? How

will parents communicate with each other or with the child when they are not together? What are the legal ramifications of the decisions that parents make? What used to be automatic can now be highly problematic. Making a formal parenting plan can help to ease these problems.

A parenting plan is a written agreement that outlines specific arrangements and responsibilities for parenting. It helps parents develop a way of making decisions that affect their children's health, education and welfare.

Family mediators can help parents develop a parenting plan.

### What is Family Mediation?

Family mediation is a process to help parents resolve their problems and develop coparenting agreements out of court. Mediation works if both parents are willing to compromise.

If you are emerging from an abusive or violent relationship, safety needs to be a central focus above the development of a cooperative parenting relationship. If you fear for your safety or the safety of your children, help and protection is immediately available through FSEAP.

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## What parents can do to help their children adjust to the separation or divorce

### Communicate with the children

Communicate honestly about the facts of the divorce process and outcomes. Keep the children informed. Keep the information at a level appropriate for their ages. Let the children know that the divorce is not their fault, and that both parents love them.

Allow your child to express his or her feelings. Take care in speaking about your own emotions to your children. Acknowledge your feelings to your children, but turn to friends, family, counselors, or clergy for emotional support. This will help you avoid giving your children an emotional burden.

### Maintain consistency

Children need a lot of stability to anchor them during the stressful times of the early stages of separation and divorce. Change as little as possible, especially at first. Do not alter the way you discipline and reward your child. Keep the routines (bedtimes, meals) the same. Children feel safest when things are familiar.

### Creating two homes for your child

It is important that the child feels like she belongs at your house, even if you are a non-custodial parent. Keep some familiar and cherished items of the child's at each parent's home. Make sure to maintain special places for such items – whether it's a shelf, a room or a trunk.

### Help your children stay connected

You should support your children's friendships and activities. Changing schools and day care is a bad idea and should be avoided if possible. Often schools will make residency exception in cases of separation. Even if you must move to a distant neighborhood and school district, make an effort to have sleepovers and play

dates with their old friends, and encourage new friendships too.

Grandparents and other members of the extended family are very important to children. Ensure children have the opportunity to spend time alone with family members with whom they have close relationships. Relatives can provide emotional security and support.

### Do not fight in front of the children

Create an environment where children are protected from conflict. Have your disagreements well out of earshot, and remember kids are experts at listening in. Do not make your children take sides or act as go-betweens or messengers. Do not quiz them about what your ex-spouse is doing – if you really want to know you can phone him or her yourself.

### Avoid speaking of the other parent in negative terms

Children do not want to take sides. They love both parents and it can be very hurtful for them to hear bad things about a parent.

### Seek Support

Make sure anyone who needs counseling – you or your children – gets it.

Contact your FSEAP Professional to find out about the support and counseling services available to parents and children going through separation and divorce.

#### Resources:

Berndt, David John; *Dealing With Divorce: 7 Tips to Protect Your Kids*;

<http://www.divorcesource.com/MD/ARTICLES/berndt1.html>

Health Canada; *Because Life Goes On: Helping Children and Youth Live with Separation and Divorce*; PWGSC, 2000

Major, Jayne; *Creating a Successful Parenting Plan When Families Divide*; [http://betterdivorce.com/conflict-](http://betterdivorce.com/conflict-resolution/parenting-major.htm)

[resolution/parenting-major.htm](http://betterdivorce.com/conflict-resolution/parenting-major.htm)

Ricci, Isolina; *Mom's House Dad's House: Making Shared Custody Work*; Macmillian, 1980.

*Family Services* offers confidential professional assistance on a wide variety of personal and work-related issues. For more information on your EAP, call:

**1-800-668-9920**