

LAPEER COUNTY
FRIEND OF THE COURT

SMILE

(Start Making It Livable for Everyone)

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



Sponsored by:
Lapeer County Circuit Court Family Division
Information provided by the Oakland County Friend of the Court

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INTRODUCTION

Each year over one million marriages end in divorce in the United States. When divorce and separation happen, people feel alone and wonder how anyone else lived through it. **SMILE**, Start Making It Livable for Everyone, is a program for separating/divorced parents with minor children. **SMILE** is an expression of deep concern for the welfare of families by the Lapeer County Circuit Court, Family Division, Board of Commissioners, and the Friend of the Court.

The developers of this program have worked with hundreds of divorcing families having difficulties with time-sharing, parenting roles, and other separation-related issues. The **SMILE** program helps parents better understand the effects of separating, the needs of their children, and their roles in promoting their children's healthy adjustment to separating.

The information in this booklet has been drawn from the experience of the developers of the **SMILE** program and other professionals in the field of divorce and separation. The booklet was compiled by Lorraine Osthaus Randolph, Director of Family Counseling at the Oakland County Friend of the Court, in consultation with the **SMILE** program developers and Friend of the Court staff.

Because each divorce/separation and family situation is unique, readers are encouraged to consult other services available to separating parents and their children. These include psychological services, legal services, support groups, emergency services, court mediation services, conflict resolution and mediation agencies, and books or articles relating to separating.

WHY IS SMILE IMPORTANT...

- Separating is a process over which children have no control. Children should not become its victims.
 - 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 separating, 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 SEPARATION/DIVORCE

SEPARATING BRINGS CHANGE. Every family member must adapt to a new way of living. The more parents know about separating, the better they are able to cope with the changes and help their children adjust.

SEPARATING IS PAINFUL. Children feel hurt and helpless when parents separate. They are emotionally attached to both parents, and most children want their parents to stay together. When separating occurs, children, as well as parents, go through a grieving process, which engenders feelings of disbelief, anger, sadness, and depression. Children experience a number of 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 relationship, events that occurred at the time of separation, and the divorce process. Separating 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 often easier to deal with than the emotional upheaval of 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 is due in large measure to the parents' relationship after the separation and parents' relationships with their children. Parent's attitudes and actions make a big difference in how children adjust to separating. Parents may not be able to be friends after separating. 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. 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. There are many different paths in which children will be raised by parents (or parental figures) who live in different homes. These guidelines apply to any family in this situation, regardless of how the family was formed.

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HOW SEPARATION FEELS

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 is not occurring or act as if it does not affect them.

BARGAINING – Parents may have thoughts about ways that the relationship can 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. Children may try to reunite their parents.

ANGER – Parents realize that their needs have not been met during the relationship. Anger surfaces. Anger may be directed toward self or others. Children may be angry with 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. Depression is draining making it difficult to think about the future. Children may cry frequently or become withdrawn.

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

Separating is painful for children. The effects of separating vary with children's ages. The effects also depend on the circumstances surrounding the separation. How your child was doing before the separation, the kind of help adults are giving, the relationship between you and the other parent and other factors affect your child's reactions. Every child is different and may react in different ways to separating. 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 repeatedly.
- Promote close, consistent contact with both parents.



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PRE-SCHOOLERS (Three to Five Years Old)

This age group is greatly affected by their parents' separating. They have difficulty understanding what is happening to their family. Pre-schoolers are very vulnerable because they are not based in reality and do not have some of the supports that older children have.

Common Reactions

Pre-schoolers have a fear of abandonment and even routine separations become traumatic. They may have bad dreams and demand to sleep with you. Children in this age group believe that the world revolves around them, and they may think that they caused the separation 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 that 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 that the absent parent will return or that parents will reunite.

Helpful Responses

- Reassure your child of your love and support.
 - Correct any misconception that your child may have about causing the separation by giving simple, truthful reasons for the separation and reassurance that the separation is not your child's fault.
 - Accept your child's return to earlier levels of behaviors and recognize that as security increases, the regression will decrease.
 - Promote peaceful, cooperative co-parenting because children in this age group react very strongly to parental conflict.
 - 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 that reconciliation is not going to happen and that any behaviors by your child will not cause it to happen.
 - Let your child know that you are sad about the problems separating causes to help your child feel less isolated and alone in distress.
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Six to Eight Year Olds

Children in this age group keenly feel the losses separating 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 year olds 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 that another child will replace them or that the parent with whom they spend the majority of their time will leave just as the other parent did. They feel deprived that both parents are not there for them on a daily basis, 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 that most children want their parents to reconcile and gently explain that you will not be getting back together.
 - Accept that 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 is OK to love both parents.
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Nine to Twelve Year Olds

Intense anger is the most distinguishing reaction to parents separating 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 separation. 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 that felt by other age groups. They believe that parents could stay together if they tried hard enough to resolve their differences. They may think that their parents do not 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 makes them feel rejected, powerless, and hurt. Nine to twelve year olds 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 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 separation 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.
 - 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 that 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. The way that they distance themselves from their families and achieve independence is an important factor in why the impact of separation can be so great. Some adolescents feel hurried to achieve their independence and may separate too soon emotionally or feel so vulnerable that 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. 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 relationship because of the fear that their parents' separating may foreshadow their own relationships. They feel shame and embarrassment about the separation 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 did not make the marriage 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 while letting them know that you are monitoring their activities and maintaining curfews and house rules.
 - Provide a safe haven so that 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.
 - Be available to talk with your teen and show that you care.
 - Let teenagers know it is okay to love both parents and that they do not 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 that teenagers do not 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 separating 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 separating are:

1. That children have an ongoing relationship with both parents;
 2. That parents stop fighting and resolve or minimize their conflicts; and,
 3. That 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. 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 that 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 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 that you take steps to maintain your wellbeing and balance so that 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 that there will be times when nothing seems to be going right, but remember that things usually get better.
 - Approach single parenting with a positive attitude and speak encouragingly about the future. Children need to know that you are strong and are 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 and will likely be overwhelmed if they are forced to integrate a new person into their lives before they are ready.
- 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 separating 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 partner/spouse from your knowledge of your ex as your child's parent.
- Keep in mind that 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 and 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 that negative image. 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 that 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.



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DO'S AND DON'TS TO HELP YOUR CHILDREN

When parents separate, 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.

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 separation but does need to have a reason for the separating that gives an understanding of why it is happening. If your child asks you about something that you can't answer, say so, but reassure your child it will be worked out.
- Speak hopefully about the future. Children need to know that they will be taken care of and continue to be loved by both parents. They need to be reassured that they are not to blame for the separation.
- Let children know, sometimes repeatedly, how they will be affected by the separation, including what changes take place and what will stay the same. Children need to know where they will live, where they will go to school, when they will see their other parent, extended family members, and friends.
- Plan a parenting time schedule so that 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 mindful of what you post, your co-parent, and even your 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 or make tapes 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 that you and the other parent will not expose your children to your arguments.

Emotions run very high during separations. 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 that 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 is not 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 is 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 that 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 cannot control.
- Don't expect your children to take sides.
- Don't refuse financial or emotional support to your children as a way 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.

REMEMBER: As you and your children move through the process of separation and adjustment, your children are looking to you to guide them to "safe ground." You are their role model. How you handle this separation 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? Alternatively, 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 the separation 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 if cooperative parenting is established.

After separation, one parent usually is responsible for the primary care and maintenance of the children. The other parent has parenting time with the children, time that either is defined by an order of the court or is agreed upon by both parents.

At first, co-parenting may seem to complicate an already stressful situation. Separating parents may find that 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 and feel good about themselves. Following are some guidelines and suggestions to facilitate co-parenting.

BEING CONSISTENT. It is crucial that parents are regular and consistent about co-parenting. Children need to know that they will be spending time with both parents being picked up and returned at scheduled times. If an emergency arises, that requires a change in times 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. Parents should share any information that pertains to the welfare of the children.

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 that 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 that anything is wrong. Children may be involved in an activity that they do not 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.

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REBUILDING TRUST. It is essential that separated parents make efforts to rebuild trust between themselves. 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 time 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 that children are not always accurate in their portrayal of events.

SHARING AND PARTICIPATING IN ACTIVITIES. Because of the newness of the separation and changes in roles, it is helpful to outline a list of specific activities for the parenting time. Choose activities that are appropriate to children’s ages and interests. Reading books together, picnics, walks, biking, cooking, games, trips to parks, the zoo, museums, 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 skills and independence and share in an activity that the parents enjoy. 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.





FIRST, ASK YOURSELF:

Is this a child-related problem?

Bringing up problems that have to do with marriage, divorce or separation issues of the parents is not part of the business of parenting.

Does this problem have to do with the children’s health, education, or time sharing? Separating parents may have to limit discussions to these three topics.

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, schedules change, 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 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 that each parent can give a little.

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

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



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GAMES PARENTS PLAY – NOBODY WINS

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

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

GAMES PARENTS PLAY

I SPY

A parent sometimes asks a child many questions about what is going on in the other parent’s home – questions about whether mom or dad has a boyfriend/girlfriend and whether they are 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 oneself – 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 the separation. Both look for support for their position because then parents can assure themselves that 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.

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MESSENGER

Warring parents cannot stand to talk to each other and sometimes do not want to take the chance of making the other parent angry. Therefore, 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, they become overwhelmed and feel less than whole. They feel alone, and miss the companionship and help with responsibilities that were part of the 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 or 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 are not there, the parent will be able to cope.

I’M STARTING OVER

Sometimes separation makes parents feel that they are starting over and that they are young again. They may adopt clothing or hairstyles 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 that separation 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 separation. 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 that they are the better parent, or to intimidate the other parent to gain something else.

Children feel at fault in these games; if they were not around, they would not be a vehicle for the parents to continue to fight. They believe that their feelings do not matter because the parents are so consumed with waging war.

NAME CALLING

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

Children do not 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 that 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.



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

BUT MOM (OR DAD) SAID YES

Children to get their own way at the expense of one of the parents also play this game. Children know that kinds of events or activities that 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, separating 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 that 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 will not 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 cannot 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 that 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 separation games they play. Children sometimes display hurt and anger by acting differently from ways they behaved previously. 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.

Parents who understand 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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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 separate 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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CONCLUSION

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

The adjustments required in post-separation relationships are never easy, for separation is one of life's most stressful events for everyone involved. Children are devastated by separation and feel powerless. Typically, they experience tremendous loss and pain. They have been dependent on both parents, and the props have been knocked out from under them. They feel disbelief that 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 separated parents need time for themselves to regain a sense of balance and personal well-being. If grieving parents lose 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 separated parents are having problems talking with each other.

Children need relationships with **both** parents after separation, and parents must do what they can to promote those relationships. Children desperately need parental cooperation. Parents **can** learn to get along after separation and share responsibilities for their children even if they did not get along as partners. Parents or children who have great difficulty coping with separation should seek professional help. Hopefully, the information in this booklet will serve as a guide to raising secure and healthy children after separation.

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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.*

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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.*

