



DAWSONS
SOLICITORS

Helping children through divorce



Children can often feel abandoned, guilty, powerless and confused by what is happening around them when their parents divorce, separate or experience problems in their marriage.

The aim of this booklet is to provide you with some ideas as to how you can best help your child cope with the changes going on around them.

It is important to remember that children are resilient and, given the right conditions, can adapt and move on. You do not have to be together to be effective parents.

So how can you help your children...

- **Keep conflict to an absolute minimum** - on divorce marital disputes about parenting become even more polarised. Try not to argue in front of your children, particularly about issues concerning them. Children are very distressed by conflict and it is much better for them if they are able to see you both reach a compromise or resolution. Children also benefit long term as they realise that there are constructive ways to resolve difficulties;
- **Provide children with clear, honest, explanations appropriate to the child's age** - think about the timing of your discussions e.g. not just before bed or just before school. Preferably try to have these

discussions together to ensure that the children hear the same story and initially to all of the children together (later speaking to them individually). Do not provide too much detail or blame your spouse / ex-spouse and make it very clear that the issue is with your relationship with each other rather than anything to do with the children;

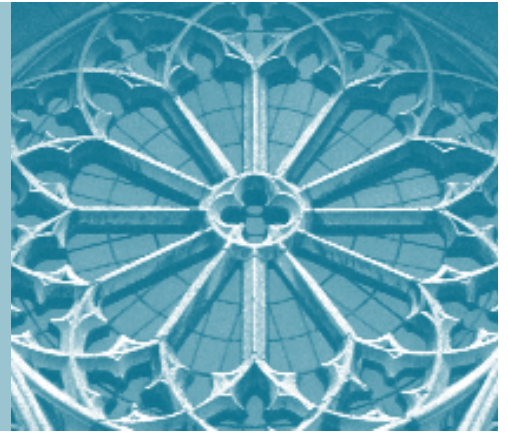
- **Encourage good quality contact with both parents** - this can only happen if both parents are giving permission for the children not only to spend time with the other parent, but also making it clear that it is appropriate for the children to enjoy it. Encourage as much contact with the other parent as possible. It is common for children to be concerned about both of their parents following separation and it is important that they know where both parents are and that they are okay. The easiest way for them to do this is to see both of you as often as possible. Try to as flexible as possible and minimise the artificiality of contact;
- **Accept that your children's reactions are normal** - you cannot make your children feel what they do not feel and however surprised you are by their reactions ensure that your children feel that they are able to express them. Younger

children may start bed-wetting, become clingy or throw tantrums, while older children may regress in their schoolwork. With support, time and understanding all of these behaviours are likely to disappear;

- **Continuity and stability are important** - so as far as possible, keep to the children's normal routine e.g.: schools, sports lessons, music lessons, time with friends, boundaries, discipline. In between contact with the other parent try to encourage phone calls and letters (if appropriate, having regard to the child's age). It is also really important that both parents keep to the arrangements that are made to see the children so that the children know that they can rely on their time with each parent without feeling let down or disappointed by them.

Dawsons

Suzanne Kingston, head of the family department at Dawson is on the Children's Panel and is extremely experienced in dealing with all aspects of private children law. Suzanne has a team of four assistants and two other partners all of whom have experience in complex children matters.



- Allow your children to talk about the other parent freely and without condemnation - this helps to retain your child's self-esteem and a sense of identification with each of you as a parent. This will reduce your child's worries about being asked to choose between you.
- Make sure that, if necessary, you obtain external support for you as a parent - your emotional health of you as the children's parent is hugely important particularly if you are the parent with whom the children spend the majority of their time;
- Have clearly defined roles for step parents - they should provide friendship and support but not discipline. Be aware that new partners can be seen as rivals for parental attention and affection, so if you have a new partner, ensure that you continue to spend good quality time on your own with your children. It appears that becoming part of a stepfamily can be helpful for younger children but harder for older children to adapt to. Older children appreciate stepparents more when they act in a supportive and friendly way rather than being involved in discipline or control.

REMEMBER ABOVE ALL TO CARRY ON REASSURING YOUR CHILDREN THAT YOU LOVE THEM AND THAT YOU AND YOUR EX-PARTNER WILL CARRY ON BEING THEIR PARENTS.

Useful numbers, reading material and links

Parentline Plus - 0808 800 2222
www.parentlineplus.org.uk

NSPCC
www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/OnlineResources/ReadingLists/SeparationAndDivorce

Factors associated with adverse outcomes for children

Research shows that divorce adversely affects a significant number of children, mainly for the following reasons:

- The absence of one parent - absent parents often struggle to sustain a close relationship with their children and guilt and practical difficulties may mean that they ultimately drift away from them;
- The economic hardship of the lone parent - parents may work longer hours and there is often less money around which is accompanied by a potential drop in social status;
- Parental conflict both before and after the separation - continuing and chronic conflict between separated parents is a major cause of stress and damage to children who become sensitised rather than accustomed to the conflict. Parents using their children in their struggles with their ex-spouse, even if only as message carriers, causes stress and confusion to their children. Children benefit enormously from parents who attempt or appear to be able to resolve arguments or establish compromises;
- Experiencing more than one set of changes in family circumstances - for example, new partners can be seen as rivals for parental attention and affection. The children are already having to come to terms with their parents' separation - if at the same time they have to manage a number of other changes, such as new partners and possibly children being brought into the household, this can feel overwhelming for them. Children cope best with divorce when they can sustain a good image of themselves. They need to feel wanted, loved and respected. Children fare best where parents are able to maintain routines, boundaries and discipline and where the care is warm and consistent.. Children generally long for their parents to reconcile whatever the previous conflict and can have great difficulty accepting that the separation is final.

Children's longer term views about divorce

As with everything, it is possible to learn from other's experience. In particular, it may be helpful to consider the experience of other children whose parents have divorced and the comments that they make about the experience several years later, with the benefit of hindsight.

Some comments made by children whose parents divorced years before:

- They wish that there had been less fighting - they felt in some way responsible for the arguments;
- They wish they had been given encouragement to love the other parent - that way they would not have had to keep secrets;
- They wish they had been given more explanation about what was happening - they would not have felt so left out and powerless;
- They felt loyalty to each parent and didn't want to upset anyone - this led to them telling each parent what they thought they would want to hear and feeling a real burden;
- They wished they had been able to talk openly about each of their parent's new partners - they worried about saying they enjoyed their company.