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A Psychological Guide for Families: Separation & Divorce

Child & Family Psychology and Therapies Service

Aims

This guide aims to:

- Give parents an understanding of what separation and/or divorce means to children.
- Provide some guidelines to help parents talk to their children about their decision to split-up.
- Prepare parents for the emotional and behavioural problems that sometimes follow the break-up of a relationship.
- Suggest some practical ideas for helping children cope following a separation and/or divorce.
- Recommend books that might be helpful – both for parents and children.

Introduction

As parents we hope to build a safe and happy world for our children to grow into. There will be ordinary losses and disappointments of life that we can help our children cope with. Indeed, children develop by becoming able to face difficult experiences.

When there is a serious family upheaval through parents splitting up or divorcing it may be hard for parents to help their children in the way they would normally, because they are struggling with their own feelings of anger, disappointment or guilt.

(For simplicity we will use the term separation to include divorce. For children the issues of parents splitting up is similar whether or not they were married)

This booklet is written for parents to help them think about ways they can help their children cope when they separate. Parental separation affects 1 in 3 children in the UK. It is the most common traumatic life event to be experienced in childhood. It is one of the most stressful events for both adults and children.

Although you cannot take away the difficulty of separation for your child there are some things you can do to help your child.

Breaking the News

Many couples worry about how they are going to tell children about their decision to separate. They want to find a way of breaking the news as gently as possible. Because it is such a difficult thing to do, they are likely to put it off for as long as possible. However, it is inevitable that children will notice changes in their parents' moods, overhear remarks, witness arguments or learn about the separation from someone else. Children are also affected by the strain of living with parents who are on the point of a break-up. They are sensitive to the tensions, even if attempts are made to ensure that disagreements are kept out of earshot. The uncertainty about their future is likely to be even more difficult to cope with than the truth. It is important, therefore, that once a decision to separate has been made, children are told as soon as possible.

There are no hard and fast rules about breaking the news. However, the following suggestions may prove helpful:

- Explain, at a level the child can understand, why mummy and daddy are not happy living together anymore, and will get along better if they live apart.
- Acknowledge how upsetting this news is, and let children know that all attempts have been made to avoid this conclusion.
- Be clear that the decision is final.
- If it is true, let the children know that they have been one of the greatest pleasures of the marriage/relationship.
- If you can, try to have worked out beforehand as much of the practical detail as you can, and let your child know these details.
- Don't be afraid to express sadness – this will give children the important message that they don't have to hide their feelings.
- Give children some control by inviting them to make decisions where they can (e.g. what day to visit mum/dad), but do not burden them with the responsibility of difficult decisions or decisions that make them feel disloyal.
- Tell children over and over again that just because dad/mum doesn't live at home, it doesn't mean they have stopped loving them.
- Give children permission to go on loving both parents freely and openly.
- Reassure them as many times as they need to hear, that they are not the cause of the break up.

How your child may see things

Once the trauma of the actual separation is over, some parents are able to look forward to starting a new phase in their life. At the very least there will be a release from the strain of uncertainty about the future. However, it is extremely unlikely that children will recognise any benefits. They may feel as though their whole world has fallen apart. It is important for parents to try to understand things from the children's point of view.

Children cannot be expected to understand the finer details of why unhappy relationships come to an end. For many the separation can feel like they have been deserted. The experience can threaten their trust in relationships, and they may question what else is really safe in the world around them. Younger children in particular may fear total abandonment. (If daddy can leave mummy, then maybe mummy can leave me!).

Children are likely to experience feelings of denial. Children may hold out hope for a long time that their parents will get back together. The parent's behaviour may seem selfish and unnecessary to the child. The family relationships the child was used to have gone but the people themselves are still around leading different lives. They may feel furious with the parent who has left for leaving and furious with the parent who remains for not being able to keep the other or for getting rid of them. Temporary reconciliation may raise a child's hopes, only for them to be dashed once more.

Your child may then feel ashamed at these feelings especially for feeling angry with the parents when the parents are clearly distressed too. They may also feel ashamed that this has happened to their own family; ashamed that they were not a powerful enough "pull" to keep the parents together.

Your child may feel guilty for feeling all these things or that they cannot help you to feel better or to make things ok. They may feel guilty that they have thoughts or wishes that seem disloyal, (e.g. "I wish I could speak to daddy everyday on the phone.") Your child may feel guilty that they are responsible for causing you to split up. (e.g. "If I hadn't been naughty daddy would have stayed..."). It is very important you let your child know it is not their fault you have separated. Adults make decisions that children cannot understand.

Your child may feel it is them who is being rejected. In a way, this separation can be harder than bereavement in that the parent is still alive and living a different life.

Your child is likely to experience some or all of these feelings at different times and sometimes all at the same time! Needless to say, this is a very confusing time for your child.

How will my child react?

Because all children are different, there is no way of knowing how they will react to the news that their parents are splitting up. Some children may act as though nothing has changed, others may show an immediate and extreme response. Some

children may behave differently in different settings (e.g. at home, at school, with grandparents). Research suggests that children of different ages are likely to respond in different ways.

The following are generalisations, but they might prove helpful in preparing parents for what to expect:

Under Fives

Pre-school children usually appear to be sad and frightened when their parents split-up. They may become clinging and demanding. Bedtime fears, and fantasies about parents dying are not uncommon. They may start to wet the bed when they have been dry. They may show great reluctance to leave you and then have a tantrum when it is time to return. They may refuse to be left alone, for even a minute. Pre-school children often express aggression towards other children, and quarrel with brothers and sisters.

School-age Children

With school-age children, sadness remains, but anger becomes more marked. This is usually directed towards the parents – especially the one the child lives with (usually the mother). She is likely to be blamed by the child for everything that has happened. The absent parent, on the other hand, may be idealised. It is hard for your child to deal with the conflict of loyalty that the separation stirs up. They may blame themselves and feel unlovable.

Pre-adolescent Children

Pre-adolescent children tend not to show their feelings. Covering up is common and they may seek distractions in play and other activities. It may be difficult to get through to children at this age – they don't want to talk about things because of the pain and embarrassment they feel. Again, the child may side strongly with one parent – sometimes to the extent that they refuse to see the other parent.

Adolescents

Adolescents may appear depressed, and choose to 'opt out' of family life. It is common for friends to become the alternative 'family', providing a sense of belonging, continuity and stability. Rebellious behaviour may provide the young person with excitement, acting as an antidote to their sadness. Worries about their own relationships, sex and marriage may surface.

The separation may make them feel insecure just as they are wanting to start to separate themselves. They may react by "rushing into independence" as a way of not facing what has happened at home or they may feel pulled back into the home to act as a "surrogate parent" to the rest of the family.

Whatever the age of your child at the time of separation it is something they will carry on going over in their minds as they grow up. Difficulties are likely to resurface at times of change and uncertainty.

What Else Can Parents Expect?

Children who are struggling to come to terms with their parents' separation may present with the following behaviours:

Helplessness

The child may 'opt out' of family and school life. They may cut themselves off from everyone, and by doing so 'protect' themselves from being hurt again.

Aggression

The child may 'act out' inner hurt, resentment, or confusion by hitting out at the world. They may become verbally and physically aggressive towards parents, brothers and sisters, and may get in trouble at school.

Substitution

The child may seek out a substitute mother or father – a friend of the family or a teacher, for example.

Given the trauma that the child has experienced, these behaviours are 'normal' and should be expected. If you are struggling to manage these behaviours telephone the Child and Family Psychology Service and ask for a copy of our booklet 'Managing difficult behaviours'. It contains some useful advice. It may also be helpful to speak with your Health Visitor or with your children's teacher.

By the end of the first year following the separation, most children are beginning to feel better, and emotional and behavioural difficulties are starting to settle. Of course, this does not preclude the return of the pain, especially on special occasions.

Reminders of family events and traditions – no longer possible – are hard to bear. Parents embarking on new relationships or remarrying can also prove particularly difficult for children to cope with.

If your child continues to display an extreme reaction after a year, and you are largely following the advice in this booklet, it may be worth talking to your General Practitioner about who else can help your family.

What Can You Do to Help?

Taking time to understand your child will help you to respond to their different moods, questions, behaviours in a sensitive way. There are some other things you can do to help.

Here are some suggestions that might help to ease the pain:

- Try and keep as many aspects of your child's life the same as they were before (e.g. school, clubs, bedtime, house rules, friendships etc).

- Try to make contact visits regular and reliable – it helps if they are on the same days each week. Keeping a calendar that your child can understand may help keep things clearer for them.
- Maintain as friendly a relationship as possible with your ex-partner – avoid arguments when the child is present. Money disputes and contact arrangements need to be kept as adult issues. Mediation may help you in this. It is very important you do not talk badly of your ex-partner. Remember this is your child’s father or mother.
- Encourage the child to talk positively about his or her parent, **do not** enlist them to take sides, spy, or act as a go between.
- Provide continued assurance of love and support – when words fail, touch.
- Let them know they were not responsible for the break up.
- Give time and attention, listen.
- Don’t discourage your child from talking about the separation – allow the child to share in your sorrow, but not your bitterness.
- Let the child continue being a child – don’t turn to them for your support. Identify other adults who can support you.
- Tell your child’s school so that they can make allowances for their behaviour and moods.
- Allow the child space to be alone as well as time with you or other trusted adults.
- Try to label the child’s feelings. They may not have the words to talk about how they feel. Try not to get frustrated by this. Your child will learn about feelings from watching how you deal with the situation.
- Be mindful of special days.
- Try to keep discipline consistent whilst making some allowances for the confused feelings. It does not help your child to abandon all the rules. This will make them feel too much has changed. Allow your child some leeway when they are feeling bad but remind them what is and is not okay behaviour.

Try to be aware of how your own moods and preoccupations may cloud your judgement of your child’s behaviour. You may be less tolerant of difficult behaviour because you are stressed and it may stir up feelings of guilt and worry in you.

- It may be that separation represents a new start for you. Your child may not feel this at all. Give them time to adjust before introducing something or someone new to cope with. If you already have a new relationship, if

possible, it may be easier if this takes place when your child is not around. Otherwise, your child may feel they are the only ones suffering the consequence of the previous relationship.

- If there was violence in your previous relationship, your child needs to know how they will be safe. It may be hard for you to do this but your child may want to remember the good things about your ex-partner as well as knowing that hurting other people with violence was wrong. Your child needs to know that people are not all bad, there is some good in everyone. It is also important that you do not identify any aggressive behaviour in your child as similar to your partner's aggression. Your child may need to learn other ways of resolving conflict. It will not help them to be over identified with the violent parent.
- Encourage your child to keep contact with their family network and friends. Your family needs as much support as possible at this time.

Where Can I Go for Help?

If you have concerns about your child it may be helpful to talk to your Health Visitor or General Practitioner or the child's school teacher. It may be helpful to talk to someone outside of the family.

If you feel your child has not been recovering from the separation and things are getting worse, your General Practitioner/Health Visitor may suggest your child is offered some further help from our service (Child and Family Psychology).

If there are difficulties between the adults you may try the mediation services through the courts, National Family Mediation or privately.

If you need specialised legal advice, solicitors who are members of the Family Law Association will be able to help.

The local library or internet can help with addresses for these services and others who help with issues for lone parents (e.g. Gingerbread)

If you are worried about the safety of your child you should talk to your General Practitioner or your local Social Services Department.

There are some books that you may find helpful, and some you can read with your child.

Further Reading

Burrett, J., (1991) *To and Fro Children: A guide to successful parenting after divorce*. London: Thorsons.

Herbert, M., (1996) *Separation and Divorce: Helping children cope*. Leicester: British Psychological Society (Pacts Series).

- Marshall, P., (1993) *Cinderella Revisited: How to survive your stepfamily without a Fairy Godmother*.
Leicester: British Psychological Society
(This book has an excellent reading list for children)
- Ackerman, Marc J. *Does Wednesday mean mom's house or dad's?: Parenting together while living apart*. Wiley & Sons.
- Lansky, Vicki. and Prince, Jane. (1998) *It's not your fault, Koko Bear: a read together book for parents and young children during divorce*. Book Peddlers.
- Jarratt, Claudia J. (1994) *Helping children cope with separation and loss (Rev. Ed.)*. Harvard Common Press.
- Binch, Caroline *Since Dad Left*. Frances Lincoln (0711211787) Age 4 – 7
- Brown, Laurene Krasny and Brown, Marc. (1987) *Dinosaurs Divorce*. Collis. Age 5 – 8
- Mark, Jan. *The Twig Thing*. Puffin Books (ISBN 140326413). Age 10 +
- Blume, Judy. (1972) *It's not the end of the world*. Pan Piper (0330256890). Age 10 – 13.
- Cape, Johnathan. *Two of Everything*. (ISBN 0224046527). Age 10 – 13.
- Thomas, Pat. *My family's changing*. Age 4 – 16
- Cole, Julia. *How do I feel about my parents' divorce*. Watts Books (ISBN 0749626704). Age 6.
- Grunsell, Angela. (1989) *Lets Talk about Divorce*. (ISBN 0863139418). Age 8 – 12.
- Lazo, Caroline Evensen (1991) *The facts about Divorce*. Simon and Schuster.
Age 10 +
- Nystrom, Carolyn. (1986) *Mike's Lonely Summer: A Child's Guide Through Divorce*. Lion Publishing plc (ISBN 074592729). Age 10 +
- Stoves, Rosemary. *It's not your fault: What to do when your parents divorce*. Piccadilly (ISBN 1853402338). Age 10 +.
- Boyd, Lizi. (1987) *The not so wicked stepmother*. Puffin Books.
Age 3 – 7.
- McAfee, Annelena and Brown, Anthony. (1984) *The visitors who came to stay*. Hamish Hamilton. Age 5 – 8.
- Drescher, Joan. *My mothers getting married*. Methuen. Age. 4 – 8.

Althea. *My Two Families*. A & C Black. (ISBN 0713645423). Age 6 +.

What do you know about stepfamilies? Watts Books (ISBN 0749618647). Age 7 +.

The National Stepfamily Association can be contacted at:

Chapel House
18 Hatton Place
London
EC1N 8RU

Helpline: 0990-168 388

Acknowledgement

Much of the information for this booklet was extracted from Martin Herbert's booklet referred to above.

We hope that you have found some ideas in this booklet that you would like to try out. In our experience, change can be a difficult process for everyone in the family, and things can get worse before they get better. It can be hard to keep going, but many families tell us that it is worth persevering.

Please let us know what you think about this booklet

1. How easy is this booklet to understand?

Not at all easy	1	2	3	4	5	Very easy

2. How helpful are the ideas in this booklet?

Not at all helpful	1	2	3	4	5	Very helpful

3. What might you do differently now that you have read this booklet?

4. Please tick the box and give us your address if you would like to receive another booklet from our range.

Adversity	
Anger	
Anxiety	
Behavioural Difficulties	
Bereavement	
Separation and Divorce	
Siblings - Helping your children to live with and learn from each other	
Sleep Problems	
Sleeping walking, nightmares and night terrors	
Soiling	
Trauma	

Do you have any other ideas for booklets?

Your name and address

Thank you for taking the time to give us your comments. Please return this slip to us directly or by giving it to the person who passed the booklet on to you.

Please return to Child and Family Psychology and Therapies Service
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