

## **PARENTS ARE FOREVER**

As you know, a divorce or separation decree cannot and does not end your responsibility as a parent. *PARENTS ARE FOREVER*. Both parents should make every attempt to continue to play a vital part in the lives of their children. Children need the ongoing interest and concern of their parents. Children must feel they have two parents who love them, even though those parents could not live happily with each other.

It is our hope that the information in this handout will assist you in helping your children cope with your divorce or separation with a minimum of hurt. The practical guidelines which follow are based on the many years of experience of court marriage and family counselors.

If you are like most people, you probably have some feelings of isolation, despair, depression, loneliness, grief, guilt, and a loss of self-confidence. You are worried about many things, such as finances, a new social life, employment, fulfillment of sexual needs, and the welfare of your children. You can use this present time of difficulty as an opportunity for growth or a surrender to self-pity.

The way you feel about yourself will affect the way your children feel about themselves. *The way you cope with your divorce will in large part determine how your children cope with it.* Yes, you are at a crossroads and you can choose from alternative routes.

One road leads to self-pity, living in the past, nurturing bitterness, and turning the children against your former marriage partner. This is a dead-end road which spells trouble for you and your children.

The other road, and the constructive one, leads to becoming involved with experiences that provide opportunities for you to again feel success, to get to know yourself better, restore your self-confidence, and reach out for goals that will make your life productive, satisfying, and meaningful.

The task of all parents, whether or not a marriage continues, is not easy. All parents make mistakes. But if you have a good relationship with your children and they feel your love and acceptance, they will soon forget your mistakes and remember only your goodness.

## **GUIDELINES FOR PARENTS**

As we have already indicated, the way you cope with your divorce will in large part determine how your children cope with it. Try to use the experience of divorce as an opportunity for personal growth not defeat. In this way you can continue to be effective as a parent and to not only effectively meet your children's needs, but just as important, your own needs as a person. Continuing conflict between you and your marriage partner during and after divorce can interfere with your effectiveness as a parent.

1. *Allow yourself and your children time for readjustment.* Convalescence from an emotional operation such as divorce or separation is essential.
2. *Remember the best parts of your marriage.* Share them with your children and use them constructively whether or not you have custody.
3. *Assure your children that they are not to blame for the breakup and that they are not being rejected or abandoned.* Children, especially the young ones, often feel they have done something wrong and believe the problems in the family are the result of their misdeeds. Small children may feel that some action or secret wish of theirs has caused the trouble between their parents.
4. *Continuing anger or bitterness toward your former partner can injure your children far more than the divorce or separation itself. The feelings you show are more important than the words you use.*
5. *Refrain from voicing criticism of the other parent.* It is difficult but absolutely necessary for a child's healthy development. It is important that the child respect both parents.
6. *Do not force or encourage your children to take sides.* To do so encourages frustration, guilt, and resentment.
7. *Try not to upset a child's routine too abruptly.* Children need a sense of continuity and it is disturbing to them if they must cope with too many changes at once.
8. *Divorce or separation often leads to financial pressures on both parents.* When there is a financial crisis, the parents' first impulse may be to try to keep the children from realizing it. Often, they would rather make sacrifices themselves than ask the child to do so. The atmosphere is healthier when there is frankness and when children are expected to help.
9. *Marriage breakdown is always hard on the children.* They may not always show their distress or realize at first what this will mean to them. Parents should be direct and simple in telling children what is happening and why, and in a way a child can understand and digest. This will vary with the circumstances and each child's age and comprehension. The worst course is to try and hush things up and make children feel they must not talk or even think about what they sense is going on. Unpleasant happenings need explanation which should be brief, prompt, direct, and honest.
10. *The story of your divorce or separation may have to be retold after the children get older and consider life more maturely.* Though it would be unfortunate to present either situation as a tragedy and either parent as a martyr, it would be a pity also to pretend there are no regrets and that the breakdown of a marriage is so common it hardly matters.

11. *The guilt parents may feel about the marriage breakdown may interfere in their disciplining the children.* A child needs consistent control and direction. Over-permissiveness, or indecisive parents who leave a child at the mercy of every passing whim and impulse interfere with a child's healthy development. Children need and want to know quite clearly what is expected of them. Children feel more secure when limits are set. They are confused when grownups seem to permit behavior which they themselves know to be wrong and are trying to outgrow. Children need leadership and sometimes authority. Parents must be ready to say "NO" when necessary.

### **VISITATION GUIDELINES**

The behavior of parents has a great influence on the emotional adjustment of their children. This is equally true after the breakdown of a marriage. The following visitation guidelines have been found to be helpful in achieving meaningful visits.

1. It is important to try to maintain contact between the child and the parent who has left home. Maintaining some form of contact helps the child deal with his or her fantasies which are much worse than the reality of what is happening; helps to decrease feelings of rejection; decreases feelings that the divorce happened because he or she is a bad child; reduces his or her feelings that he or she may never see the other parent again.
2. Visits should be pleasant not only for the children but for both parents. Visitation should help your children maintain a positive relationship with their visiting parent. It is important that neither parent verbally or physically attack the other parent in the presence of the children. Children tend to view such attacks as attacks on them.
3. The parent with whom the children live must prepare them physically and emotionally for the visit. The children should be available promptly at the time mutually agreed upon and returned at the time agreed upon.
4. The visits should not take place only in the children's home, The visiting parent may wish the children to visit in his or her home overnight, or may want to plan an enjoyable outing.
5. The question is often asked, "Should the father take the children to the girlfriend's house?" The same question is asked about the mother if she is the noncustodial parent. Visitation is the time for the children and parent to be with each other; to enjoy each other; to maintain positive relationships. Having other people participate may dilute the parent-child experience during visitation. However, it should not be ruled out altogether. Avoid "parades."
6. Visits should be as frequent as practical. Any schedules established should be flexible. Should scheduled visits need to be canceled (and sometimes they have to be), inform the other parent as soon as possible with a full and honest explanation to the child.

7. You may need to adjust the visitation schedule from time to time according to your children's age, health, and interests.

8. Frequently, noncustodial parents ask why they should visit. They are hurt; feel they are no longer needed; the custodial parent has the home and the children. The visit is one of the few times that the noncustodial parent has personal contact with the children and for that reason it should be a meaningful one for both. Even though the parents have not been able to get along, the children still need both parents.

9. Often, the noncustodial parent questions where they should take the children on the visits and what they should plan in the way of amusement for them, particularly if the children are young. Activities may add to the pleasure of the visit, but most important of all is the noncustodial parent's involvement with the children. A giving of self is more important than whatever material things they may get.

10. The visit should not be used to check on the other parent. Children should not be pumped for this kind of information. They should not be used as little spies. Often in the children's perception the parents hate each other and the children will feel uncomfortable at the time of the visits. In the children's minds, if they do anything to please the visiting parent, they may invite outright rejection by their other parent. They may feel they have already lost one parent and are fearful of losing the other. For these reasons, parents should show mutual respect for each other.

11. The children may be left with many problems following visits and both parents should make every effort to discuss them and to agree on ways to deal with them.

12. Both parents should strive for agreement in decisions pertaining to the children, especially discipline, so that one parent is not undermining the other parent's efforts.

### **IF YOU NEED HELP**

It is unfortunate that many people believe that to ask for help is a sign of weakness, for in reality it is a sign of strength. It takes a great deal of courage for a person to say "I have a problem which I cannot solve alone and I need help with it."

Asking for help does not mean people are incapable of solving their problems. For in the final analysis, it is the people themselves who solve their problems. Counselors merely guide people and give some direction to their search for solutions. There are few people who have not needed help at some time in their lives. Those who reach for professional help in times of crisis have a better chance of finding effective and permanent solutions in a shorter time.

Persons with problems often become discouraged which only emphasizes weaknesses. They often overlook strengths still present as well as other alternatives for coping with these problems. A trained counselor may assist in achieving a better understanding of strengths or weaknesses.

Advice from well-meaning friends and relatives, in many cases, may further aggravate the situation. Friends or relatives usually are not professionally trained to treat problems and they can seldom be objective.

Professional counseling may create an awareness which can assist you in dealing with your and your children's problems at this time.

If you need marriage and family counseling before, during, or after divorce, the following sources are suggested to locate a professional counselor:

Association of Family and Conciliation Courts  
OHSU-Psychiatry, GH 149  
3181 Sam Jackson Park  
Portland, OR 97201  
Telephone: (503) 220-5651

American Association of Marriage and Family Therapists  
<http://www.aamft.org/>  
1717 K Street, N. W  
Washington, DC 22036

Other sources to contact to obtain help in finding a marriage and family counselor includes Family Service agencies, your family doctor, your minister, priest, or rabbi.

Choose a counselor as you would a doctor or lawyer. Ask about credentials, training, and years in practice. Do not head blindly for the yellow pages in the telephone directory. Such listings often include some persons with no training at all, or training that is skimpy or outdated.

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