

Children and Divorce: How to guide your family through separation/divorce.

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Table of contents.

Introduction.	4
The changing context for relationship.	7
Developing the new context.	9
When speaking to the children about the separation/divorce.	12
Managing daily life with the new family structure	14
For the parent who leaves the family home.	18
When children refuse visits.	20
Introducing important new people to the children.	21

Introduction.

If you are reading this, chances are that either you or someone close to you has just been through the most devastating experience of your adult life.

I know from my own experience that separation/divorce is an awful time for the whole family. It changes the very fabric of life and all change brings us face to face with our deepest fears. For most parents the biggest fear is that they will doom their children to lives of emotional distress coming from a 'broken home'.

Here's a news flash: How divorce impacts your family is up to you.

What most parents need during the transition period is, time, information, reassurance and support. In this report I would like to offer all of the above by mapping out the changes that take place in the family relationships during and after separation/divorce.

The first point on the map is of course, the choice to separate. **Please answer the following questions:**

- Do you believe that your marriage is truly over?
- Have you explored every avenue that may lead towards reconciliation?
- Have you discussed the ending with your husband/wife?

If you have answered yes to each of the above, please continue.

If you have only answered yes to one or two, than it may be necessary for you to take time to come to terms with the choice to separate. The decision is the first step, as each of these questions must be answered YES.

WHY?

Because accepting the reality of the separation is what will help both people to become clear about what needs to happen next. When you say YES to separation you are saying NO to what has

been in the past. NO, to the known and familiar, NO to your own comfort zone (no matter how unhappy the situation) The past is the life you have been most identified with and saying NO to that is a very scary step.

Fear is a natural and healthy response to the unknown and it is how you manage that fear that will make the difference to your new life and the lives of your child/ren. For the family to stay in relationship the parents must develop the qualities of leadership and bring the group forward in a 'partnership of care' for the family.

Making a resource list.

Each parent must have access to all the support they can get during the initial separation. Making a resource list of all the help you have at your disposal will soothe the feelings of isolation and loneliness that bombard your emotional world.

The list has two parts, inner resources and outer resources. eg, An outer resource list could look like this; friends, family, going to the gym, listening to music or dancing. Include in your list any resource, past and present that has helped you at other times in your life.

Inner resources are more to do with your own inner strength, personality traits such as optimism or a sense of humour or it may include religion or a spiritual activity such as meditating or singing. These are the aspects of yourself you know you can rely on to help you through.

This is a time when you could be feeling very vulnerable and it is empowering to know how to help yourself and just how much support you already have. Go to the list when you are feeling in need of support and see what do you need today. Add to it when you come across something new to keep it up dated and don't be afraid to use a resource you had as a child.

It is a painful time but can be a wholesome process where both people may grow and develop as they leave the security of the marriage and use the resources and skills they have gathered to, 'get on with their lives'

The changing context for relationship.

To weather the storms of such immense change we need to keep a clear perspective of the situation and focus on what remains constant rather than what is fading away. Relationship is of course the answer to both so let's look at what is happening to the relationship.

The temptation is to say well it's over, and this is true to a point but it is only half the story.

Once children are born out of a relationship, then the relationship sub-divides and has two aspects; one is the personal relationship you have with the other parent and the other is the partnership of care for your child. The latter is what remains and will always BE, no matter where you live or how old the child is, YOU are always that child's parents.

When we see relationship in this way there is no reason to believe that the family ends when the marriage does. The relationship that was based on marriage needs only to change.

Context for continued relationship

The big change is in the context for relationship. The marriage, which was the original context, is now ending but what continues is the relationship of parenthood. The new context for staying in relationship with your former wife/husband is that of shared parenting.

To successfully make the transition from one context to the other it is necessary to take time to grieve for the loss of the old context, as it is something you will both have invested in for some considerable time.

Acceptance of the loss of the marriage is key to moving forward.

Actualising the loss is another matter. This means being able to declare what has happened openly.

Saying out loud, "It's over". Talking about it to each other, friends and family will make it real for both of you. If you try to keep the separation a secret, believing you are protecting children, older parents, etc, you deprive the whole family unit of the support and resources that would be otherwise available. It is important to mark the 'ending' as this is the beginning of something else.

Give yourself time

It's not just the marriage that is over. It's also your dreams of a shared future with that person. Growing old with the father/mother of your children, a shared retirement, or perhaps you believe you have also lost your best or oldest friend. The person you have grown up with for many years expressing intimate worries and fears about shared situations in your life.

Such closeness, which was appropriate at the time, now may create a sense of vulnerability when you are with that person in the new context, but ironically it can also be the foundation of the new parenting relationship as you endeavour to care of your family together.

Both people need time to experience the pain of their loss, as it will be different for each person and one may come to terms with the new situation faster than the other. Try to be patient with each other.

Talking helps.

Being able to identify and express feelings that may never have been voiced before is not something that is easily achieved. It might be very hard for you to share these feelings with the other parent so outside help (personal counselling) may be of great assistance at this time.

That way you can choose how much or how little you need to say about your personal process to your former husband/wife yet still keep the lines of communication open for the growing parenting relationship.

When speaking with the other parent blame is not helpful at this stage. To be part of any solution, you must first find your

own part in the problem and own it. It takes two people for any relationship and it is from this base that you can begin to find a lasting resolution to the continued family relationship.

Developing the new context

Answer the following question:

Are you willing to stay in relationship with your former husband/wife as partners in care?

Are you willing to trust the children to the care of the other?

Are you willing to accept that your child has a RIGHT to relationship with both parents?

As with the last set of questions you need to answer YES to all three as this is the basis for the parenting context and needs to be agreed and understood by both parents for you to hold this for the family group.

As we saw earlier this is a process of sub-dividing the existing relationship into its two component parts; your personal relationship and your parenting relationship. Learning to separate these two aspects will take time and may benefit from a structure to contain it.

Make a conscious decision to have regular discussions with the other parent about what needs to happen so you are both clear and consistent when speaking with the children.

You may choose to go outside the family home to discuss this and other issues regarding the divorce and home arrangements. The process of creating this space together will build ground in the new context of partnership in care and together you will come to the best way of doing things for your family.

Strategy for continued relationship.

Every couple are different so each family needs to have a plan of action, which will be tailored to suit your own particular family needs. The mediation agreement will take care of financial matters and care of the children's physical needs. This plan is one of strategy for continued relationship.

To include the children in the process of divorce or separation we must be willing to look at some of the hard facts from the child's point of view.

It's really hard for parents to hear but research shows that in most cases, divorce/separation makes children miserable. That's not to say that a marriage that is not working should be continued, 'for the sake of the children' but it does mean that separating parents cannot expect the children to agree that the separation is best for all concerned.

This is why it's really important that you have completed and answered YES to the first three questions. You both have to agree that divorce is the way forward.

Children need to see that you are both on the same page as it gives them the continued support of a united front and stops the likelihood of playing one parent off against the other.

This will allow the conversations in the family environment become more normal and not loaded with undercurrents that children pick up on.

The plan

The plan will consist of:

When and what you are going to tell the children.

Which parent will remain living with the child/ren.

When the parent who is leaving is actually going.

Where they will be living.

Why this is happening.

What the availability of each parent to the children will be.

What are the arrangements for special days and festivals, i.e. birthdays and Christmas.

Without a plan something may be overlooked or left unsaid. Vague and ambiguous statements may be perceived as uncertainty and lack of confidence in the decision to separate. **Do not give children false hope of a reconciliation** through your unwillingness to discuss certain topics.

Structure helps children to feel safe.

Stay with the agreed plan. Be open to discussion with the children by listening to their questions. Answer them truthfully while remaining mindful of their age and understanding. Be sure they all understand the new structure of family life. Remember this is a shock and you need to be willing to go back over the plan individually over the next week or so as some children need time to take in something new.

When speaking to the children about the separation/divorce.

Children whose parents tell them what is happening survive the immediate shock much better than those who are just told, "S/he is gone." Unfortunately research tells us that only a small percentage of parents actually do this.

As a parent coach I have found that there are a number of reasons for this.

Parents are not sure how to go about it or how much to say.

They are often afraid that they will become too emotional and don't want the child/ren to see them crying or angry.

They are concerned that it will not be acceptable to the child/ren and don't want any more confrontations.

The reasons seem valid enough but put along side the suffering caused to the child without this difficult conversation it seems worth while to find a strategy that would help you make it happen.

Let me address these one at a time.

1.

Making time to bring the family together for an open discussion with both parents about the separation gives some containment to the discussion.

Do it together and choose your words carefully as you explain the new living arrangements to the children.

Try to avoid saying things like, "He's divorcing me." or "She doesn't love me any more." as this creates doubt in the child's mind about love and that it can be taken away. It would serve you better to say the way Mummy loves Daddy is different now.

Reassure the child/ren over and over that they are loved and that you **both** will always be part of their lives.

2.

Accept that children have a right to their feelings and a need to express them. Your own ability to accept the emotional side of yourself will help the child/ren accept that difficult emotions are manageable and acceptable. It gives them permission to have feelings and express them as you tell them the devastating news.

This is a hard one for most parents as they feel they are responsible for causing the child's suffering. Never the less it is important that you learn how to manage your own feelings so you can hear what's going on for the child without going into explanation or blame. The only fix-it available, is to care.

Children can often feel shut out by the separation/divorce as parents may become so involved with their own process that they are emotionally unavailable to their child/ren and unable to acknowledge that this is happening to them too.

3.

To avoid confrontation the key word is inclusion. Have something prepared if you need it so that the choice for separation is final. Do not give children false hope for a reconciliation, let your words reflect the fact that this is happening to the whole family and you are there to help them through it. This talk is to let them know what is happening and to ask them how they feel about it.

If you are both willing to listen to the child/ren and answer truthfully any questions raised the discussion will be less confrontational.

Managing daily life with the new family structure

Where possible if the child/ren can remain in the family home, and therefore in the same schools and neighbourhood (at least for a few months) the normal structure of daily life helps them to feel that life can go on.

Keeping things as normal as possible reassures the child that the safety of home and family is still strong. Treats and special days like sports day at school and birthdays could still be spent together but in a new way, perhaps with the inclusion of friends and other relatives.

What is most important for the continued family relationship is that you respect the child's RIGHT to relationship with Both parents, all grandparents and the extended family from both sides.

The parent that remains with the child/ren (more typically the mother) needs as much outside support as possible as the child/ren will worry about her and need to know that she is ok. The more friends and family around, the less the child/ren will feel isolated and overly concerned about her emotional well-being.

They will accept sadness and emotional distress if they have been included as above, but they also need to feel that she is still 'solid' and there for them.

The child/ren need to be free to say when they miss the absent parent without feeling that they are taking sides. The absolute agony of split loyalties is an underestimated experience by most adults. We often find one parent trying to enlist children against the other parent where hints are subtly given that communication with the other is in some way disloyal to them.

Children tend to blame themselves for the break up.

It's difficult for a child, who is after all the centre of his own universe, to believe that he is not the centre of yours too. Some of the friction he has actually experienced will have involved his behaviour; discipline, homework etc or overheard arguments about

fathers neglect, mothers pampering, which will all seem to confirm his guilt.

An open attitude towards the other parent will help a child feel they don't have to take sides, Mammy's boy/ Daddy's girl etc.

There might be a tendency to feel like the parent who stays at home is the real parent and the other is only a visitor but I would challenge you to look for and find your own collusion in this dynamic. Check to see how willing you are to ask 'Him' for help. Check your own mind sets about being only a part-time parent. It will take two of you to make this work.

Parenthood is about relationship rather than role.

Whether you live with your child/ren or not you are always their Mum/Dad. The parent that remains at home may be just as absent emotionally as one who is not physically present. The high emotional drama of the adults can sometimes dwarf the child/ren's emotional experience and they end up FEELING abandoned by both parents.

Children do worry about the absent parent, young children especially. The warmth and security of home and family seems like a horrendous exile even though it was voluntarily taken.

They are concerned with,
"Where does Daddy sleep?"

"Does he have a TV?"

"Who makes Daddy's dinner now?"

These are real concerns and need to be addressed as quickly as possible.

To soothe these fears the child/ren need to see the new home of the absent parent as soon as possible after they leave. They need to be able to picture in their minds the setting Dad is in as he talks to them on the phone.

Mothers who are willing to acknowledge the reality of these concerns and offer practical reassurance that *Daddy's all right*, do the child an important service. Sometimes a quick chat on the phone sets the child's mind at ease and when it is at Mum's suggestion the child has permission to love both parents.

Brothers and sisters may often become very close at this time and it may be through a sibling that the remaining parent finds out about immediate worries of one of the other children.

Respect your children's own little group and it's hierarchy, they now have a shared experience of adversity and are the ones who will remain constantly together while parents will come and go between them.

An only child can often suffer the most in separations/divorce as they carry the burden of companionship the parent who stays at home yet often feel very alone in the experience of concern for the absent parent. Great effort is needed to allow the child access and relationship with both parents.

It takes time adjusting to a home environment where the other person/s is missing. It can be a difficult transition as gradually you begin to withdraw the emotional investment you have placed in the other person and in the marriage itself.

This stage has different demands for each parent. The one who remains with the children, (usually Mum) needs to be mindful that it is all too easy to fall into the habit of making your child your new emotional partner. This is an unrealistic role for a child and will not benefit your learning to become more emotionally independent. Being aware of the possibility of this happening, especially with older children will prevent it happening unconsciously.

The child/ren need to be told and shown that they can love and be loved by the absent parent, without risking the love of the one who stayed at home. They need to believe that the Mum wants the child/ren to have their Dad.

Child/ren need to talk freely about their Dad to their Mum and vice versa. That means that neither must use the child/ren as a spy in the enemy camp nor freeze with disapproval at the mention of a new, friend or problem of the other.

The parent that stays at home may have to accept low paid work because of their domestic responsibilities or hold on to a

higher paid job, which will involve expensive childcare arrangements. Even with child support there will not be the same income to provide for the family as before and adjustments need to be made that often tend to put the personal needs last. Either way the parent at home is going to be short of both time and energy.

The remaining parent needs to hold steady the practical structure of daily life. The shock of a parent leaving causes huge disturbance in the child/ren's emotional life and this needs to be steadied also. It's a lot to contend with and again I ask you to see how easy it is for you to ask for help.

This often means having to put your own feelings to one side as you deal with an issue for the child/ren.

I strongly suggest that whenever possible you get back to your own process in whatever way you can so that things you are feeling do not build up inside.

There may be times when you have to hold the child/ren's needs above your own emotional response eg, if the child is sick in bed it is not reasonable that they have to wait until they are better to see the absent parent.

Writing a personal journal may be of help to create a space in each day that is just for you. When you are feeling drained it may seem like the last thing you want to do but it keeps you in touch with yourself and how you are dealing with your own needs.

You can help with visits to the absent parent.

While it may be tempting to say, 'Let him see what it's like to cope with them all day' it's not fair on the children or the Dad. Fathers who have had little to do with their young children's care will not become skilled carers over night.

If the child doesn't want to see the absent parent, it may be tempting to say, that's ok you don't have to if you don't want to, but once they loose touch it is very difficult to regain a relationship that is fundamentally important to the child's development. It will serve the family better to try to figure out what the problem is and solve it together. This may mean speaking with the other parent either with the child or on their behalf.

For the parent who leaves the family home.

The parent who leaves the family home suffers the loss in a significantly different way. It is more typically but not always, the father that finds himself in this position. For that reason I will refer to the absent parent as Dad but understand that it is becoming more common for the Dad to find himself to be better suited to staying at home with the child/ren.

Child/ren need to know and see, that the end of father-mother love is not the end of father-child love. They need to know that whatever the parents feel about each other, the absent parent still loves and cares about them.

Children need to see the absent parent regularly enough to stay in touch with each other's ordinary, everyday concerns. For the young child that means at least once a week.

This is a particularly lonely experience for the Dad and can cause the child great anxiety over his well-being when they are at home, so it is well worth finding something that works for you both.

For the father, rather than suffer this huge loss alone it may be tempting to fill the void as quickly as possible, with work, sex, drink or rushing headlong into another relationship prematurely.

Managing your relationship with the child/ren.

It is almost impossible to sustain an intimate relationship with the child/ren on the basis of outings to the pictures or visits to Mac Donald's. Using the family home as a base may create a strain on all concerned (even when this is permitted) so it may be better to use a friends house until the new is established.

At first, the Dad will find him self with little of the resources he is used to relying on for his emotional and physical needs. This means ordinary family life, eg. making a meal together or watching TV, is now only a weekly experience with long lonely days in between even though he sees the children regularly.

Feeling like a visitor in your former home, perhaps one you are still paying a mortgage on, is painful but try to see this as providing a safe boundary for your family to grow up in rather than the place where your former wife lives.

It is very difficult to see her there without thinking that she has everything that you lost but recognise that her loss is different and no less painful than yours.

Try to reach a workable understanding with your former wife regarding monetary issues. It is very easy to fall into a pattern of compensating for not being at home with money and gifts. This is a mistake as in time you may believe that all the children want from you is cash and you devalue the real nature of your parental relationship.

If there are unresolved issues over maintenance speak to the other parent directly and do not bring it to the child/ren, looking for support. 'I was right, s/he was wrong.'

Remember your husband/wife is not the same person as their Mum/Dad.

Children need parents who talk to one another

Even if it's only a short conversation on the phone or at the doorstep as the child/ren transition from one carer to the other, they must see that pathways of communication open at all times.

It is not reasonable to expect a young child to explain that they can't go swimming because they have a cold or that they will miss a visit next week because of a school commitment.

Avoid making them messengers that run between you as there will be certain circumstances when they need you to be together. For example, you can't score the winning goal in the school cup final twice. Children need to be able to count on their parents being there to witness their great moments.

Children need to see people who are important to you.

If the child/ren were in the habit of seeing your parents, family members or friends that are important to you, then it is important that you keep these people in their lives. It may seem difficult to share your precious time together with others but it is worth while as it gives the child/ren continued relationship with their full extended family and reassures them that you are not alone.

When children refuse visits

This can happen for different reasons and at all ages. Leaving it up to the child to decide is generally not a respectful way to respond.

A very small child may find it difficult to be separated from the Mother at any time, so it may be necessary to have short visits at home where the child is in familiar surroundings.

If visits cause emotional distress to the child it may seem easier for everyone if you drop them, but it is a mistake and an outdated way of thinking.

Many years ago it was thought that a child in hospital who got upset during visits were better off left alone to 'settle'. We now know that it is unlimited access that helps the child adjust to the new setting and it is the same for you. If there is some distress what your child needs is more time with you not less.

If you have not been the full-time carer, don't expect yourself to know how to do it straight away. Bring your young child on visits to friends who have other children as playmates and learn slowly how to look after your child/ren.

Older children may refuse visits because they find them a 'bore'. Adolescents generally want to be with their friends more than their parents and see weekends as their own free time. Allowing them a say in the planning of visits will help and this need not be restricted to outings. Dad may have time to bring them to band practice or football and could offer help in planning activities such as a party.

As the child grows older it may be better to have after school/college time together during the week rather than have every weekend taken up with family commitments. It is also important you recognise they are growing up and choose activities that are suitable to their stage of development.

This will pave the way for a more adult relationship where you both have to make time to see each other and need to respect the activity of the others lives.

Introducing important new people to the children.

Once the separation/divorce is accepted and the parenting relationship is established, contrary to common belief, the child/ren are often much happier to know that the separated parents have a new love in their lives.

However unfair it may seem, mothers who live with the child/ren often find that children are more willing to accept a women friend they meet with their Dad than a men friend that comes to the family home. This has more to do with territory than it has to do with accepting the new person.

The child/ren feels that the house 'belongs to' them and it could be seen as an invasion of their space. The family home may also house the ghost of the absent parent and the new person may unwittingly sit in 'Dads chair' causing unnecessary upset.

Introductions are probably best done on neutral ground such as on outings or by having them come to the family as a family friend rather than a private friend of Mums.

Whether the new person is a man or a woman, few children will take reproofs or instruction from a comparative stranger. On the other side few adults find it easy to live with children without doing it in some way or other.

Open communication with your child/ren about the new person will help defuse any situation before it builds up.

If you know that a relationship is not likely to be permanent then let the child/ren know that they need not be concerned either way.

If however you think or hope it will be a long lasting relationship then make it clear to the child/ren early enough to help both make an effort to like each other.

When this becomes a more permanent arrangement and the new person is going to live with the child/ren try to arrange for the 'real' parent to meet with the new step-parent. Children need

to feel all the adults who are closely concerned with them are on the same side.

Expansion is a delicate area when it comes to family life and the inclusion of new step-Mum or Dad means the ground rules need to be made clear from the beginning. The child's family, as they see it, is growing bigger when you develop a new family grouping.

The new family group needs to have room for the old family life. This means visits with the 'real' parent are not dropped or activities usually done with 'real' parent be taken over by the step-parent. A certain amount of this will happen gradually over time but in the early stages it is important that the child feels that the 'real' parent is not being pushed out.

Don't expect children to drop the family jokes or stories, so tell the step-parent about them as they arise rather than leave them out in the cold competing with the past.

Don't push the child/ren into calling the step-parent Mum or Dad unless they do it spontaneously.

A step-Dad would need to take it very easy on discipline issues, manner's etc When it comes to relating to adolescents he may never be permitted an authoritarian relationship but may, if he is willing to accept it, in time, be offered a friendship instead.

A step-Mum unfortunately has to contend with the 'wicked step-mother' stereotype and needs a softly, softly approach. She will need to hold back on personal care issues as she could be perceived as stepping beyond the boundaries with things like hair plaiting and scrubbing necks. When the child/ren **spontaneously** hug and kiss her they have accepted her and will be more comfortable with her involvement of their personal care.

To give the new grouping a chance to develop naturally it is important not to see yourself standing between the step- parent and the child/ren. The children need to get to know them as a person rather than as your appendage. However jealous they may seem of the new comer at the beginning, they will enjoy your new happiness and in time wish to be a part of it.

Expanding your family in this way allows your child grow up feeling loved and secure, surrounded by adults who have their best interest at heart. The child/ren are free to love and be loved by all the people they care about. You and your former husband/wife are free to be in the kind of relationship you want to be in without the burden of guilt and are supported in your life in a new and wholesome way. I wish every family love and joy in their lives together.

If you have any question or found this report of any help I'd love to hear it, so please write to me at: trish@trishbanks.com