

what you

NEED TO KNOW about...

Separation and Divorce

Separation and divorce happen often. In North America, close to 40% of relationships end in separation or divorce within 15-years. (Kreider et al., 2002; Department of Justice, 2006).

Separation and divorce is stressful to children and youth for many reasons. Their family, as they know it, is changing profoundly, and they have no control over the situation. Some children feel that if their parents are leaving each other, they are leaving them, too. The experience may be stressful for children and youth because of:

- Conflict between parents. It's hard to imagine a separation or divorce without conflict. But conflict, tension and fighting between parents is really hard for children and youth. Children and youth want to be able to love both parents, but conflict or fighting can make them feel a sense of uncertainty and unpredictability. It may make them feel that they have to choose sides.
- Lack of control. Separation and divorce cause changes in routine; in where children live and when they see each parent. Because children and youth have so little control over the situation, some try to feel 'in control' by blaming themselves for the separation. This is a big burden for a child or teen to take on. Any change in routine can be very stressful, especially for younger children or for those who have a hard time with change.
- Parents may be busier. Being a single parent isn't easy. Running a household alone may not leave as much time for children and youth as before.

Separation:

Legal separation is when a couple decides to live apart from each other. The law recognizes couples as legally separated if the couple tells family and friends that they are separated.

Divorce:

This is a process that officially ends a marriage. In a divorce, spouses must divide their property and make arrangements for child custody, alimony and settlement of debts. In Canada, a couple can divorce (in most cases) only after they have been separated for at least one year.



If the separation reduces conflict between parents, children and youth may benefit in the long run. Less conflict between parents allows children and youth to have happier and healthier relationships with parents and other family members. Even though separation and divorce is stressful, there are many things parents can do that will make things easier for children and youth.



How to help your child or teen through a separation:

1. At first...

- ✓ Meet your children together with your spouse to tell them about the decision to separate or divorce.
- ✓ Explain that both of you have made the decision to divorce
- ✓ Emphasize that the separation is not the children's fault. Try to find ways that your children or youth can have some control over how things happen. Make sure to consider your child's level of development when you do this.
- ✓ Reassure your children that both parents will:
 - Keep on being parents
 - Continue to love and have a close relationship and connection with them
- ✓ Understand that children have a need to love both parents. Try not to get upset when your children express love for your former spouse.

2. Living arrangements

- ✓ Tell them where each parent will be living
 - With younger children, parents will need to decide where children live. Usually younger children will live with their primary caregiver.
 - With older teenagers and young adults, you will need to delicately see if they have a preference, and respect that preference if possible
- ✓ Try to come up with the same expectations and rules for both households. Children and youth do best with consistent limits and structure.
- ✓ Work out a regular schedule of visits, when children will be with each parent.
- ✓ Make sure your children have private space for their things in each household. Try to keep essentials in each house (like toothbrush, toiletries and school supplies) so children and youth won't have the stress of always having to 'live out of a suitcase'.



3. Communication & relationships

- ✓ Use a communication book to write down children's school commitments and activities (like birthday parties or sports). Both parents share this book, passing it back and forth after their day(s) with the children. This book makes communication easier; it avoids the difficult feelings that could surface with face-to-face talks.
- ✓ Make sure that each child gets to spend regular one-on-one time with each parent. One-on-one time is important. This is when children and youth are most likely to express their true feelings, giving you the chance to listen and support them.
- ✓ Talk with your children about what they can tell their friends and teachers.
- ✓ Try to see your relationship with your former partner as a business-like co-parenting arrangement. Focus on raising your children. Talking about past hurts and resentments is not helpful.
- ✓ Keep the children out of any conflict between parents. Involving children in parents' conflicts, or wanting them to take sides, is harmful to the children.

- ✓ Be assertive (and not aggressive or hostile) when interacting with your former partner. For example, rather than getting angry with your former partner for always being late:
 - Share how you feel or how it affects you (or the children): “When you’re late picking up the kids, they get very worried that they’ll be late for school. And it makes me late for work” or “I find it very difficult to make plans when you don’t drop the kids off when you said you would.”
 - Politely, calmly and respectfully request what you’d like. “Would it be possible for you to...” or “I need you to...” or “I was hoping...” or “I would appreciate it if you could...”

Always-

Keep your children’s needs in the front of your mind, and do your best to meet them. While this sounds simple, children’s needs sometimes get lost with the stress and pain parents can experience during a separation and divorce. Children must be able to always turn to their parents for what they need.

What to avoid

- ✗ Try not to ask younger children to decide which parent to stay with. This is unfair; it puts too much pressure on them by forcing them to choose between parents. In general, young children should be with whichever parent was their primary caregiver.
- ✗ Try not to say bad things about the other parent (whether true or not), or blame the other parent in front of your child. You may be feeling hurt, upset and angry at the other parent, and it might be tempting to vent your frustrations in front of your child or teen. This can be very harmful for children for a few reasons:
 - Children want to have a positive relationship with both parents.
 - If you are blaming, negative and critical, this ‘negative’ energy can have a negative impact on your relationship with your child. If the other parent stays calm, then you end up looking bad. If the other parent retaliates, conflict gets worse, which also stresses your child or teen.
- ✗ Try not to involve your children in any conflict or disagreements between parents.
- ✗ Try not to use your child as a go-between or messenger with the other parent. If you have something to ask the other parent, ask the other parent. Even simple messages like “tell your mom (or dad) that I’m going to be half an hour late with pickup after school” can be difficult, as it can lead to the other parent to express frustration with you on your child.
- ✗ Try not to complain to your child or turn to your child for emotional support. This is not your child’s job. Children and youth need to be able to turn to their parents for emotional support, not the other way around. If your child or teen starts being the one who meets your emotional needs, then she will no longer turn to you to have her emotional needs met. Seek emotional support for yourself from friends, family, co-workers or a counsellor.
- ✗ Try not to involve your child in your new, personal relationships unless you are certain that the relationship will be a long term relationship.

- ✗ Try not to get upset with your child or teen if he becomes upset when you begin dating. Children naturally are afraid that they will lose the affection and love of a parent who is sharing some of their time and affection with someone else.
- ✗ Try not to discuss adult issues (e.g. Finances, child support, custody/access matters) with your children or youth. Separation and divorce is costly, and parents may feel tempted to share these issues with their children. Unfortunately, telling children and youth about financial stresses may end up making them feel more nervous, burdened and insecure. Instead, tell your children that the adults are in charge, and they will take care of the financial issues.
- ✗ Try not to expect your children to be little adults. For example, avoid telling your son, “You’re the man of the house now.”

Living apart from your children

If you live apart from your children, it is very important to still be a part of their lives. Children and youth need and want both parents in their lives. When parents are not involved in their lives, children may feel that they are unloved. This can lead to sadness, anxiety and low self-esteem. Children and youth need to know that both parents love and value them. This has a powerful impact on their mental health and self esteem.



If you live apart from your children:

- ✓ Make the effort to see them regularly. There is no more powerful way of saying “I love you” than by seeing your child regularly. If this is not possible, connect with your child often in other ways: send letters, texts, emails, talk on the phone or Skype. Regular contact is another way to say, “You’re important to me, and I love you.”
- ✓ Keep your promises. If you make promises to your child, then keep them. If you have made plans to visit with your child, then do not cancel those plans last minute.



- ✓ Remind your children that they are important. Send letters and pictures that your children can keep to remind them about your relationship.
- ✓ Remember important days. Learn about their friends and activities.
- ✓ Celebrate holidays and birthdays with your child as often as possible.



When parents start dating...

After a separation/divorce, children and youth often find it stressful when parents start dating again. They may feel jealous, and be afraid that the new person will compete for your attention. To support children and youth when you begin dating:

- ✓ Reassure your children by telling them that friends and new romantic partners will never replace a parent’s love for their children
- ✓ Make sure that dating doesn’t take away from the time and relationship that you have with your children
- ✗ Try not to introduce your new partner to your children until the relationship is ‘serious’.
- ✗ It is very stressful for children and youth to be exposed to several, different romantic partners

Resources

Kids Help Phone: 1-800-668-6868, www.kidshelpphone.ca

Family Service Association, 902-420-1980, www.fshalifax.com

Family Law Nova Scotia, www.nsfamilylaw.ca

To find a Psychologist in Nova Scotia, 902-422-9183, www.apns.ca

To find a Social Worker in Nova Scotia, 902-429-7799, www.nsasw.org

Books for parents

- *Mom's House, Dad's House: Making Two Homes for Your Child*, by Isolina Ricci
- *The Coparenting Toolkit*, Isolina Ricci
- *Divorce Law: Questions and Answers*, c2006, by the Department of Justice, Canada.

Books for children and youth

- *What happens next? Information for Kids about Separation and Divorce*, c2007, by the Department of Justice Canada, available at: www.canada.justice.gc.ca

About this Document

Adapted from resources written by the mental health professionals at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO), an affiliated teaching hospital of the University of Ottawa. Special thanks to Richard Voss, Social Worker; Ann Kerridge, Social Worker, www.cheo.on.ca.

Creative Commons License: You are free to share, copy and distribute this work as in its entirety, with no alterations. This work may not be used for commercial purposes. View full licence at www.creativecommons.org.

Disclaimer: Information in this fact sheet may or may not apply to your child. Your health care provider is the best source of information about your child's health.