

## Parents Are Forever

A separation or divorce does not end your responsibility as a parent. **Parents are forever.** Both parents must make every attempt to continue their vital role in their children's lives. Children need the ongoing interest and concern of their parents. They must feel they have two parents who love them, even if those parents cannot continue their own relationship.

If you are like most people who are dealing with separation or divorce, you have feelings of isolation, despair, depression, loneliness, grief and guilt, and a decrease in self-confidence. You may worry about finances, a social life, employment, fulfillment of sexual needs and the welfare of your children. How you feel about yourself will affect how your children feel about themselves. How you cope with your separation or divorce will largely determine how your children cope.

You are at a crossroads and can choose between alternative routes. One leads to living in the past, nurturing bitterness and trying to turn your children against your former partner. This is a destructive road that will lead to trouble for you, your former partner and your children. The other road leads to opportunities for you to again feel success. Use this difficult time for growth. You can know yourself better, restore your self-confidence and reach goals that make your life productive, satisfying and meaningful.

Parenting is never easy. All parents make mistakes. But if you have good relationships with your children and they feel loved and accepted, they will understand and forgive your mistakes and remember your goodness.

### Suggestions for Parents

- **Be honest and sensitive with your children when you tell them about the separation or divorce.**

Unpleasant circumstances need explanations that are brief and honest. Be direct and simple when talking with your children. Present information so the children can understand it. This will vary with the circumstances, and each child's age and comprehension. The worst course is hushing things up and making the children feel they must not talk or think about what is happening.

- **Assure your children they are not to blame for the separation or divorce.**

Children, especially young ones, often feel they have done something wrong to cause problems in the family and between their parents. Let them know that this is not the case.

- **Make sure your children know they will be loved, cared for and supported by both parents.**

Explain that your relationship as a couple is separate from your relationship as parents. Tell your children that your relationship as their parents can never be taken away.

- **Allow time for you and your children to adjust to family change.**

Separation and divorce significantly affect relationships between parents and children. This can be very stressful for everyone. Each family member will cope with the changes differently, so give each person time to process and understand the situation.

- **Support your children's relationship with the other parent regardless of your personal feelings; this is difficult but necessary for your children's healthy development.**

Your children need to respect and have ongoing contact with both of you. Do not force or encourage children to take sides, carry messages or report on the other parent's personal life. Doing so encourages frustration, guilt and resentment. Your children need to feel comfortable loving both parents.

- **Cooperate and communicate with your former partner about the children.**

Cooperative parenting reduces stress for everyone. Your children will be confident of their relationship with each of you if they see peaceful communication.

- **Keep a regular schedule that the children can count on.**

Children need continuity. Coping with too many changes at once disturbs them. Try developing a schedule, or parenting plan, that addresses your children's needs as soon as possible. This plan should be supported by both parents. Your children's needs will differ depending on their ages, and their individual personalities and preferences. Your plan must allow for changes as the children mature.

- **Be consistent with discipline, even if you feel guilty about the separation or divorce.**

Children need consistent, loving control and direction. Overly permissive or indecisive parents jeopardize their children's development when they fail to set clear expectations for their children's behavior, or to say "no" when necessary. Children feel more secure when limits are set and respected.

- **Help your children understand the financial changes that may occur.**

Children should not be burdened by financial worries. Give your children a simple explanation of the financial situation and the changes to expect without blaming the other parent.

- **Share the best parts of your marriage with your children.**

Tell them about the relationship you and your former spouse had during better times. This will help your children see what a satisfying relationship has to offer.

### Visitation (or parenting time) suggestions

- **Maintain contact between the children and both parents.**

Regular contact decreases children's feelings of rejection, beliefs that they caused the divorce, and fears of never seeing a parent again. This helps children deal with fantasies, which may be much better or worse than what is really happening.

- **Spend as much time with your children as is practical if you do not live with them.**

Make your parenting plan dependable, but flexible. When plans change, as they sometimes must, inform the other parent as soon as possible and give the children a full and honest explanation.

- **If you are a non-custodial parent, make time for your children even if you feel hurt or like you are no longer needed.**

Opportunities for personal contact with your children may be limited so make them high priorities. Ensure that visits are positive, meaningful experiences for both you and your children. Remember, your children need both parents.

■ **Seek agreement with your former partner in matters related to your children.**

This is particularly important with discipline because different rules and expectations confuse children. Every detail need not be the same, but rules and expectations should be compatible. Communicating about the children can help you maintain consistency and avoid undermining one another.

■ **Have your children spend time in both parents' homes.**

This will ease transitions and help your children feel comfortable in each environment.

■ **If the children live primarily with you, prepare them for their time with the other parent.**

Have them ready on time, and have needed clothes or gear organized. Expect them to return at the mutually agreed time.

■ **Make your time with your children pleasant for you, as well as for them.**

Avoid attacking the other parent because your children may experience this as an attack on them. Do not question the children about the other parent's life because this may make them feel like spies. Understand that your children love both of you and they may fear that pleasing one parent risks rejection by the other.

■ **It is your involvement with your children, not activities or gifts, that is important.**

Do not be so concerned about amusing your children that you miss out on enjoying their company or on opportunities to be a parent to them. The same is true about gifts. Children like presents, but your time and commitment will do more to convince them of your love.

■ **Be careful about including new partners when with your children.**

The time parents and children spend together should be enjoyable and positive. Having others present may dilute the parent-child experience, or even lead to friction, jealousy and conflict. This does not mean new partners can never be present, just that this should be done thoughtfully.

■ **Give your children time to adjust at the beginnings and ends of visits.**

It is normal for children to feel some distress at transitions, so allow them to adapt. Keep communication open with your children and with the other parent in order to discuss problems and agree on solutions.

■ **You may need to adjust your parenting plan according to your children's age, health and interests.**

Children need to develop their own lives filled with school, friends and activities. Your parenting plan must be flexible enough to allow this to happen.

**If you need help**

Asking for help is a sign of strength, not weakness. It takes courage to say, "I have a problem I need help with." This does not mean people cannot solve their own problems because, clearly, people must always do this for themselves. Counselors merely guide people and give direction to the search for solutions. Everyone needs help at some point. Those who reach for professional help in times of crisis are more likely to find effective and permanent solutions in a shorter time.

Persons with problems often become discouraged. They overlook strengths still present in themselves, as well as alternatives for managing problems. A counselor can help them find better understanding of their strengths and weaknesses.

Professional counseling may create an awareness that can help you deal with your and your family's problems. Contact family service agencies, your family doctor or your clergy for help in finding a marriage and family counselor. Choose a counselor as you would a doctor or lawyer. Ask about credentials, training and experience. Do not head blindly towards the yellow pages. Such listings often include persons with little training or experience.

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*Developed by the staff of the Los Angeles County Conciliation Courts (1987). Revised 2003.*

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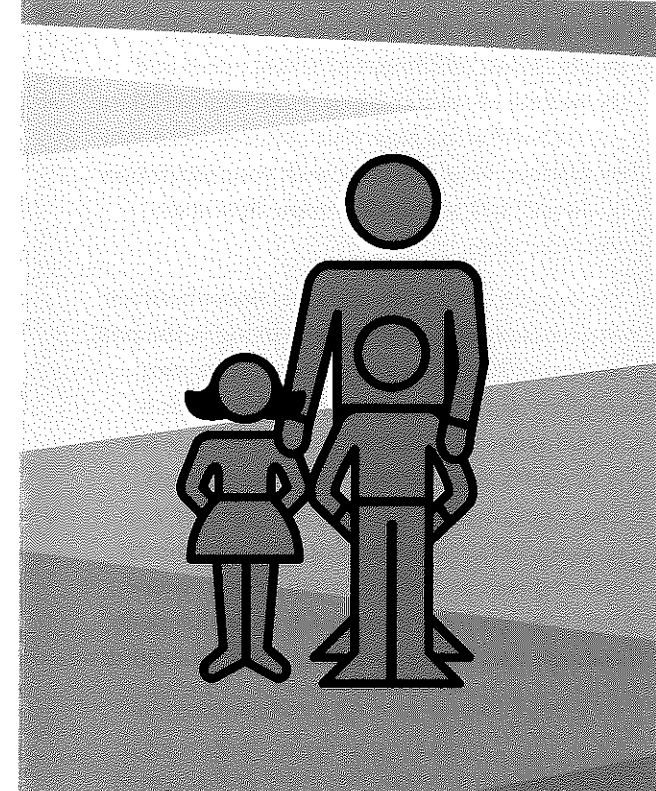
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