

# WORKING WITH FAMILIES EXPERIENCING SEPARATION/DIVORCE

TIPS FOR FAMILY SERVING PROFESSIONALS

As a professional who works with children and parents, you are in an important position of influence with families. With your support and assistance, parents can help their children to adjust to the changes that separation/divorce brings to family life.

The six tip sheets in the *Kids: The ♥ of Co-parenting* series have been designed to give family serving professionals and parents information and practical tools about the impacts of separation/divorce on children and positive approaches to becoming effective co-parents.

## Kids: The ♥ of Co-parenting Tip Sheet Series

- 1 Telling The Kids: Tips For Talking With Children About Separation/Divorce
- 2 What's Going On With My Kid?: Tips For Understanding Your Children's Behavior Through Separation/Divorce
- 3 Getting Down To Business: Tips For Co-Parenting Through Separation/Divorce
- 4 Keep The Kids In Mind: Tips For Managing Conflict Through Separation/Divorce
- 5 Planning For Success: Tips For Developing A Parenting Plan
- 6 You Asked Us... Parents' Frequently Asked Questions

## How to Use the Tip Sheets

You may want to use these tip sheets to guide a discussion with parents, or you may wish to offer them to parents to read on their own. Keep in mind:

- these tip sheets offer general information and are not designed to address and/or solve individual problems.
- the material in the tip sheets focuses on the needs of children experiencing separation/divorce, but can also apply to adults and other family members adjusting to this life transition.
- review the tip sheets carefully before offering them to family members, to make sure they are relevant to that family's situation: they are informational, and not intended to replace professional interventions that may be required, such as legal, financial and/or therapeutic consultation.

## Starting a Conversation

The *Kids: The ♥ of Co-parenting* Tip Sheet Series may be used as a way to engage the family in conversation about the separation/divorce. This can help to assess the family situation to determine what other support/resources may be required, for both the adults and the children.

## Every Family is Unique

When working with parents and children experiencing separation or divorce, it is important to remember that:

- Separation/divorce is a complex experience for families. Not all professionals have the necessary training and scope of experience that may be required -- referrals to skilled specialists such as counselors, mediators, parenting coordinators may be needed, especially for high conflict situations.
- Paying attention to a family's specific cultural norms, background and context is important in understanding their responses to separation/divorce and the specific support they may need.
- Family violence may arise through separation/divorce. To avoid triggering intense emotions in family discussions, try introducing topics such "parenting styles" or "conflict management".

## Keeping it Confidential

All information gathered in consultation with families should be guided by the principles of confidentiality, and handled in accordance with current federal and provincial laws. For more information, see the Personal Information Protection Act (PIPA) and the Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act (PIPEDA).

# 1 TELLING THE KIDS

## TIPS FOR TALKING WITH YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT SEPARATION/DIVORCE

Telling your children about your decision to separate can feel stressful and difficult, but having this conversation will help them deal with their feelings and adjust to the changes coming in their life.

### Planning The Discussion

- By planning ahead and carefully preparing, you can explain to your children how their family is changing and how they will be affected.
- Always put your child's needs and circumstances first. Try not to show anger or conflict with your child's other parent – your child's relationship with each parent should be acknowledged and protected.
- A professional counselor or mediator may be helpful in preparing for this conversation and to follow up with about your concerns or your children's needs.

### When And Where

- Share your decision to separate with your children early on, preferably before the physical separation happens. You don't want your children to hear the news from others.
- If possible, try to sit down with your children's other parent and your children at the same time, so your children have the opportunity to ask questions and share feelings with both parents together .
- Creating the right setting for the conversation is important – talk in a private place (at home is ideal) and turn off phones, TV's etc. Both adults should use courteous, civil and neutral language and control their feelings.

### What To Say, And How To Say It

- Children, whatever their age, need clear, plainly worded explanations:
  - try to keep your messages appropriate to the age of the child
  - young children need simple and specific facts, while older children may want more information and explanation

- leave out adult details and concepts (like “custody” or “separation agreement”) – these may just confuse children.

- Describe what will change, what won't change and what might change for your children in their family situation.
- Adults don't have to have all the answers! It is fine to say “I don't know right now, but I will answer this later.”
- Reassure your children that both parents will always love them, in spite of living separately.

### Listening To And Caring For Your Child

- Even though this conversation may be uncomfortable, you can help your children by comforting them through their different feelings of surprise, sadness, and anger:
  - let your children express their thoughts, by giving them opportunities to ask questions and share concerns
  - take note of your children's reactions, and encourage them to discuss their feelings – as much as they feel comfortable.
- Remind your children that they are loved by and can love both parents. Let them know they're not to blame or in any way responsible for the separation. This is a very important message for them to hear often.

### Next Steps

This talk with your children is an important first step. Plan more conversations to answer each child's specific questions and/or concerns, to manage reactions and to update them of new plans and family changes as they arise.

## 2 WHAT'S GOING ON WITH MY KID?

TIPS FOR UNDERSTANDING YOUR CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOR THROUGH SEPARATION/DIVORCE

**Did you know? Your child's behavior is a form of communication.**

**When children's language skills are not fully developed or when they are unaware or unable to express what they are thinking or feeling, their behavior can send an important message.**

Through their actions, they are communicating to you what they may be feeling, thinking or even how they are managing the separation/divorce.

### **What They're Feeling – And How You Can Help**

- Children often show a range of feelings in response to separation/divorce:
  - children of all ages usually feel insecure, worried, anxious and sad about the divorce
  - some children show their discomfort by being angry
  - feelings of loss and grief are common for children of all ages, and may be expressed as:
    - sadness (tears)
    - anger (acting out behaviors)
    - depression (withdrawal)
    - anxiety (fear)
    - physical pain (stomach/headaches)
    - regression (returning to baby talk).
- Many things will affect how your child behaves in response to your changing family situation; their own personality, their age/stage of development, how you and their other parent approach co-parenting, the amount of family conflict, and the supports and resources available to your family and your children.
- Children often show distress in their behavior when there is obvious and on-going anger/conflict between their parents. Children manage best with parents who are cooperative and who protect them from adult disagreements.

### **Every Child Is Unique – And So Are Their Reactions To Divorce**

- Each child is unique in their growth and development. Factors such as personality, environment and life experiences all contribute to how they behave and understand the world around them.
- Just as child development is individual, so are children's responses to separation/divorce. The situation forces unexpected and unwanted changes upon children – as a result, their behavior may show signs of stress.
- As children adjust to the changes in their life, a variety of behaviors can be expected and are typical until they begin to feel more safe, secure and stable in their new family situations.

### **Changes To Watch For**

- If your child's behavior shows a significant change from what is usual, pay attention – this could mean your child is having difficulty managing the separation/divorce.
- You may want to consult a child development expert or counselor if you notice marked changes in your child's behavior in the following areas:
  - eating, sleeping, toileting
  - physical and/or emotional health
  - attentiveness, activities/interests
  - school behavior and performance
  - relationships with family, friends, caregivers, school
  - general attitude and behavior (passive, aggressive, withdrawn)

## 3 GETTING DOWN TO BUSINESS

### TIPS FOR CO-PARENTING THROUGH SEPARATION/DIVORCE

When children feel caught between their parents and are faced with family conflict, their healthy development can be at risk. Co-parents must recognize that blaming and speaking poorly about the other parent, undermining them or minimizing their importance hurts children.

In successful co-parenting, adults share the decision-making, living arrangements and day-to-day responsibilities of child rearing through open and regular communication.

#### HOW TO

Raising children and meeting their needs is the most important goal of co-parenting. To manage this cooperatively, adults need to:

- put aside their own feelings of hurt, anger and resentment.
- keep adult issues and parental fighting away from children.
- assist their children to have an on-going relationship with both parents.\*

#### GETTING STARTED

Building a new “business-like” relationship for the work of co-parenting takes time, effort and practice. Tips to keep in mind:

- make your children’s health and safety your priority with your co-parent – issues that are less important may need to be dropped to avoid repeated and on-going conflict.
- keep your communication focused on sharing specific facts and information about the raising of your children – avoid talking about your feelings about your past personal relationship.
- use simple, neutral and polite language with calm and lowered voices when communicating.

#### COMMUNICATING IN A NEW WAY

Remember: you communicate not only through your words – your gestures and behavior sends a message

as well, and sometimes these verbal and non-verbal messages can be contradictory. Some co-parents find they understand each other better by:

- exchanging notes, letters, emails, faxes, texts and when necessary, using third party professionals.
- practicing “business” manners such as scheduling telephone calls, preparing for meetings, keeping messages courteous and short, writing down detailed agreements/plans.
- taking time to listen and focus on what each parent has to say.

#### MAKING THE RELATIONSHIP WORK FOR YOUR FAMILY

- Each parent has special ways of helping their child to grow and develop. Keep in mind that although your child’s other parent may have been a disappointing adult partner, they can still be an adequate parent.
- For more effective and cooperative shared parenting, a detailed Parenting Plan will help. (See “Planning for Success” for helpful tips on creating your parenting plan.)
- It’s inevitable – there will be disagreements and challenges along the way as you co-parent. Patience, flexibility, “give and take” and using expert professionals can all help to solve problems, make decisions and manage conflict. It is important for children that their parents find positive ways to handle disagreements and conflict. (For more advice on managing conflict, see “Keep the Kids in Mind” in this series of co-parenting tips.)

## 4 KEEP THE KIDS IN MIND

### TIPS FOR MANAGING CONFLICT THROUGH SEPARATION/DIVORCE

Conflict is natural – in our lives and in our families. But parents who are separating or divorcing must make a choice to put their children’s needs first.

#### What Does Conflict Look Like?

Not all co-parents relate to each other with heated anger. Conflict can range from mild disagreements to hostile and on-going high conflict, which hurts children the most.

- Co-parents can get stuck in conflict for a variety of reasons. Some examples are:
  - you may be repeating patterns of the way you communicated as former partners.
  - your fighting may hide other feelings, such as sadness.
  - you may have different life values and principles.
  - there may be a history of betrayal or little trust between you and your former partner.
  - the fighting may originate from chronic financial difficulties.

#### How It Affects The Kids

- Children need to be protected from adult issues and fighting:
  - when parents involve them, put them in the middle, or make them feel responsible, children “pay the price” by feeling anxious, fearful, sad. They may act out their behaviors in negative ways, now and in the future. Their healthy growth and development can be compromised.
- When parents manage their disagreements in positive and healthy ways:
  - children see parents who are courteous and cooperative.
  - they feel cared about by both parents.
  - they learn skills to get along and solve problems. (See “Getting Down to Business” in this series of Co-Parenting tips.)

#### Finding New Ways To Communicate

It is possible for co-parents to learn different ways to communicate and new skills to deal with conflict.

- Try to establish a shared goal of cooperation, rather than wanting to “win” or “be right”.
- Use neutral language and behaviors that do not threaten or blame the other person. This can help to reduce anger.
- Take the time to listen carefully to all ideas and sides, and to discuss and solve problems.
- Keep your conversations focused on present and future parenting issues (and not on emotional and personal problems). This helps to minimize disagreements.
- Develop a detailed Parenting Plan to offer a framework for co-parenting. (See “Planning For Success” in this series of Co-Parenting tips.)

#### Reducing Conflict When It Happens

- When arguments arise, try:
  - deep breathing
  - remaining calm and not reacting
  - apologizing for misunderstandings
  - starting the conversation over
  - finding something you can both agree on
  - if necessary, politely postponing the discussion for another time
- Look for resources to help with conflict management, such as BC’s “Parenting After Separation” program, or other educational parenting programs offered in your community.
- For some adults, resolving disputes together may not be possible. A variety of professionals may assist in these situations; they can include family lawyers who may also act as mediators and/or collaborative lawyers, mental health mediators (social workers, psychologists, parenting or divorce coordinators/coaches), arbitration and litigation options which may include court processes.

## 5 PLANNING FOR SUCCESS

### TIPS FOR DEVELOPING A PARENTING PLAN

**A Parenting Plan is a carefully thought out, written agreement or contract between you and your child's other parent.**

It is a useful tool that can help adults to be more cooperative in the on-going co-parenting of their children and to find ways to reduce co-parent conflict. Parenting plans center on the needs of children and offer parents a way to consider their child's needs first and foremost. They include specific guidelines to help establish predictability and steady routines for the child and family.

#### HOW DO WE START?

- Your parenting plan will be unique to your family, your children, and your situation.
- Aim for neutral and simple language and include detailed information, to make sure all parties understand the plan.
- You may want to write your own parenting plan with your co-parent, or you might wish to have the help of a professional (a counselor, mediator, divorce specialist or lawyer). Parenting plans can be included as a part of the separation/divorce legal documents.
- Some families begin with an "interim parenting plan" when they first separate, and then develop a more "fine-tuned" agreement some time later as both children and adults begin to adjust to the changes in their lives.
- As children grow and develop and as the family structure changes, parenting plans may need to be adapted. It's a good idea to plan for on-going and regular reviews of the parenting plan, and to write that into your agreement.

#### WHAT SHOULD WE INCLUDE IN OUR PLAN?

- Your plan should describe how your children are to be cared for, including:
  - the time your child spends with each parent and/or extended family. In most situations, children

need meaningful contact and connection with both of their parents. \*

- children's living arrangements.
- how important parenting decisions will be made (ie: health, education, faith.)
- co-parenting day-to-day duties and responsibilities.
- methods of communication.
- financial arrangements.
- holiday schedules.

- Your parenting plan may also include an agreement about when professionals will be called upon to help resolve conflict or negotiate issues.
- Creating a balance in your agreement between flexibility and being structured is important – the greater the conflict in your co-parenting relationship, the more exact and specific your plan needs to be.

#### RESOURCES FOR DEVELOPING YOUR PARENTING PLAN

- There are a number of online resources that can help with developing parenting plans, including shared electronic calendars that may help to manage co-parent and family communication. Check your local library for these helpful titles:
  - Garber, B.D. Keeping Kids Out of The Middle. 2008.
  - Gold, Lois. The Healthy Divorce. 2009.
  - British Columbia, Ministry of Attorney General. "Parenting After Separation: Handbook For Parents"

## 6 YOU ASKED US...

### PARENTS' FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

**1 I think that divorce is the best option for our family. How can I help my child to understand that?**

Separation/divorce is a challenging time for everyone, but adults and children often see it differently. While adults may see the change as a “new beginning” and an opportunity to make a difficult situation better, children often feel great loss and sadness for the way their family once was. Adults generally have some control over the situation, can take actions and make decisions that give them hope to improve their lives, but children are not in charge of their new way of life, and may be surprised as they find themselves in two homes with their family changing. Children need to have these feelings understood and acknowledged.

**2 My parenting style is very different than my co-parent; is it important to be consistent?**

It is usually better for children if their parents have a similar outlook/way of parenting, but this is not always possible. Even parents who live in one home have their own individual ways of parenting, so children can grow up well with different styles. With two homes and less cooperation and agreement, it can be more difficult to achieve consistent parenting approaches.

What is most important is to set stable and reliable routines within each of the homes. Young children do best with more consistency between households as they establish good eating, sleeping, toileting and discipline habits. Older children can handle more differences in parenting styles.

**3 My child has difficulty transitioning between my home and the home of her other parent. How can I help?**

Each child handles these “transfer times” differently; some children naturally adjust and are more flexible to changes, while others find the transition harder. To ease the transitions, try to focus this time on supporting your child’s needs and feelings, and don’t let the “business” of co-parenting or adult conflicts interfere. Give your child permission and encouragement to leave one home for the

other and never put your child in a position of having to choose between you and her other parent.

Children need adult help to plan, organize and prepare themselves and their belongings in advance of transfers. During transitions, children need patience, time and reassurance from adults as they get used to the change in surroundings.

**4 What is the best way to handle holidays/celebrations/traditions?**

Your child’s feelings and best interests should be the priority when planning for a holiday or special occasion. Family customs, rituals, and celebrations contribute to a child’s sense of family and togetherness, so continuing these life events is important.

With two households and often different routines, adults need to be flexible and creative in developing new ways to mark these special times in each home. Advance planning, communication and negotiation between co-parents are all important for a child’s needs to be considered first. Most children do not object to celebrating two birthdays, Christmas or holidays even when it doesn’t fall on the exact date.

**5 How do I know if my child needs professional help to manage our separation/divorce?**

A professional can assist children, adults and families who find separation/divorce difficult in many ways. Parents are important to helping children manage their feelings and needs; when adults get care and education through information, community resources and counseling, the entire family benefits.

Parents know their children best – if they have concerns or questions about their child, their behavior or how they are managing, it is always a good time to ask for help. Reach out to your family doctor, a community nurse, child care staff, school professionals, clergy, social workers, psychologists, or other professionals who work with families in your community.