

# Full-time Dad Part-time Kids



*A guide for recently separated  
and divorced fathers*

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## Table of Contents

### Chapter One

#### *What Your Children Need*

Children's basic needs; special needs of children whose parents are separated: a good relationship with both parents, protection from conflict, stability.

### Chapter Two

#### *Your Children's Feelings*

Children's worries and fears about parents' separation; reassuring children with words and actions; resiliency: helping children to bounce back.

### Chapter Three

#### *Your Ex-partner: Working things out*

Co-parenting; negotiating with your ex-partner; different kinds of conflict; reducing conflict; misunderstandings; a new beginning.

### Chapter Four

#### *Fatherhood After Separation: Challenges and Personal Issues*

Work; self esteem; tough feelings (grief, stress, fear, anger); finding support; new relationships.

### Chapter Five

#### *The Parent You'd Like to Be*

Dealing with change; staying in touch with your kids; how feelings affect parenting and what to do about it; being a "real" Dad.

## i n t r o d u c t i o n

# Children need their fathers and their mothers

In a perfect world, we would all live happily ever after and parents would never split up. In the real world, where we all have to live, separation and divorce are fairly common; many children do not live full-time with both biological parents. But parenting does not end after divorce. We know that children of separated parents need good parenting — in fact, they may need it even more than other kids. We also know that it's best if they can get that from both parents. Therefore, this booklet is written with the assumption that, in most circumstances, the ideal thing for children of separated parents is to have a loving and supportive relationship with both Dad and Mom.

### **What this booklet is and is not**

This booklet is about being a good father — the best one you can be in a fairly difficult situation: when you don't live with your children full-time. It is not about the family court system or how to win a custody dispute. If those are your main concerns right now, or if you are dealing with issues such as a spouse who has significant personal problems or who is interfering with your legal access to your children, this booklet may not have some of the answers you are seeking. Those problems are real, very challenging and require specialized help from a lawyer, a family mediator, a professional counsellor or a support group for divorced fathers. This resource is about the male experience of parenting after a recent separation or divorce.

## **Easier said than done**

Separated fathers do not all have the same experiences.\* Some get along well with their ex-partners; for others every encounter is a potential blow-up. Some divorced fathers live with their children half the time. Others are limited to every other weekend or may see their children under supervised conditions, or even not at all. Clearly some of these conditions make it much more difficult to maintain a close father/child relationship. One way or another though, most post-separation parenting situations present certain challenges for fathers who want to remain positively involved with their children. It's well worth it to put some time and energy into thinking about how to meet those challenges.

## **The big challenge**

When you are divorced or separated and you live apart from your children, you live a kind of double life — you're always a father, but at times your life feels childless. It's harder to feel connected to your children and you may not feel like you have very much influence over their lives. It can also be hard to find parenting information that relates to your situation. This booklet is designed to fill part of that gap and to help you think through some important issues. There won't always be easy answers, but remember that regardless of your circumstances and no matter what goes right or wrong, your continuing contact and love is very important to your children. Of course, that's important to you too, because you undoubtedly want the same thing as most other parents: a satisfying lifelong relationship with your children.

\*Editor's note: Some fathers lived in common-law relationships and so will never be divorced. However, to simplify the language, we have used certain terms interchangeably — separated and divorced and also ex-partner, ex-wife and ex-spouse.



## c h a p t e r   o n e

# What Your Children Need

If you are reading this you are separated or divorced. And although your relationship with your partner is over, you still want to be the best father you can be. But with your family world turned upside down you may be wondering: Where do I go from here? There is no one simple answer that will apply equally to all men, but a good way to begin is by thinking about your children and what they need. That is where good parenting begins.

All children have basic needs, which are the same in all family structures:

- The necessities of life: food, shelter and clothing
- Human interaction
- Care and comfort
- Warmth and love
- Guidance and protection
- To be important to someone

These needs should be met primarily by parents and all of them relate directly to the various roles that fathers play in children's lives.

**The Provider Father** (for the necessities of life)

Obviously, children need the basics: food, shelter and clothing. All of these cost money, so no matter how much time you spend with your children, supporting them financially is a very important and necessary contribution to their well-being.

**The Interactive Father** (for human interaction)

Children learn how to be good people by interacting with others: talking, listening, playing and spending time together. That starts with the positive interaction children have with parents who pay attention to them and respond to their needs.

**The Nurturing Father** (for care and comfort)

Children need to be looked after in a caring way. Youngsters of all ages need someone watching over them to see what they need at any given moment, whether it's a diaper change, a bath, a snack or a hug.

**The Affectionate Father** (for warmth and love)

Throughout life children will have many relationships. The parent/child relationship is the first relationship and forms the foundations for all others. It should be based on unconditional love, affection and warmth.

**The Responsible Father** (for guidance and protection)

Young children can't look after themselves. They need to be supervised and kept safe; they also need discipline and moral guidance from parents as they grow and learn about the world.

**The Committed Father** (for being important to someone)

No matter how much time you spend with your children, they need to know that they are very, very important to you. They need to hear it from you, they need to see it through your actions and they need to know that you think about them when you are not with them.

## **Special Needs**

No matter who they live with, children have the needs previously mentioned. But kids whose parents live separately are unique in two ways. One is that their basic needs are met by parents who don't share each other's everyday lives and who spend less time communicating with each other than most parents who live together. That presents significant challenges, which will be dealt with throughout this booklet. The other difference, which we'll deal with in the section that follows, is that children of separated parents have some special needs.

### **• A Good Relationship with both Parents**

The ideal circumstance for children of separated parents is to have a strong connection with both parents. That means your love and support is important to them, but so is the support and love they get from their mother. So, even if parents don't want to be together, it helps if Dad and Mom can honour and respect each other's relationship with the children. It's also important to respect your own fatherhood. Keep telling yourself that you will always be your children's father and that they need you to be there for them as much as you can.

### **• Protection from Conflict**

A certain amount of disagreement and conflict is normal among all people who live, work or spend time together. However, for some separated couples, conflict is bitter and long-lasting. That hurts children. In fact, research shows that ongoing conflict after divorce is more damaging to children than divorce itself. Therefore, a crucial part of effective post-divorce parenting is protecting children from conflict. That doesn't mean there can't be any disagreements or that fathers must always give in, or that taking your spouse to court will always hurt your children. What it does mean is that these are adult issues that need to stay in the adult world, as separate as possible from your relationship with your children.



### **“It Scares Me When You Fight.”**

*Almost every time Dave picked up or dropped off Tabitha he seemed to end up in a confrontation with his ex-wife. One night he heard Tabitha crying after he'd put her to bed.*

*“What’s the matter, honey?” Dave asked. She wouldn’t answer. The next morning the seven-year-old was still looking glum. Dave tried to cheer her up. “What are we going to do today, kiddo? You want to go out to Grampa’s farm?” Tabitha looked at the floor and nodded her head. In the car Tabitha was quiet. Suddenly she asked, “Are we going to Mommy’s house now?” “No, that’s tomorrow.” “Good.” Tabitha was quiet for awhile. “Daddy, are you and Mommy going to fight tomorrow?” Dave opened his mouth, but he wasn’t sure what to say. “It scares me when you fight,” she said, bursting into tears.*

*Dave felt guilty. He didn’t want to give in to Maggie, but the arguments were affecting Tabitha more than he realized. That night he called Maggie. “What do you want? Is Tabitha all right?” she started. “Wait,” he said. “She’s fine, but I want to ask you something.” “What?” Maggie asked suspiciously. Dave took a deep breath. “When I bring her back tomorrow, let’s not talk to each other.” Maggie cut him off, “But I have to talk to you. I —.” “Hold on,” Dave interjected. “I’ll tell you everything you want to know. I just don’t want to argue in front of Tabitha. We always do and I can tell it’s really bothering her. She was crying about it tonight.” Maggie let out an exasperated breath. “Fine,” she said finally. “We’ll talk later.”*

- **Stability and Security**

All children need stable care and routines, but when children are living with two different parents in two different homes, it takes more thought and effort to provide that stability. You and your ex-partner don't have to parent in exactly the same way: some aspects of parenting are a matter of preference. However, a certain amount of consistency between the two houses will help children to feel more secure and comfortable because their world is reasonably predictable. For example, if a young child is used to a story and a cuddle at one home, but is expected to go to bed all by herself at the other, it's going to feel weird to her; likewise if a child plays with friends everyday at one home and never gets to be with kids his own age at the other. It's not a question of right and wrong, but what the child is used to is important. The younger children are, the more this matters. Stability is particularly important to toddlers and preschoolers.

### **Making His Home Their Home**

*The first time the boys came to Enrique's new apartment it felt strange. He could tell that they didn't really feel at home. So Enrique decided to make some changes. He didn't have much extra money, but he found some good children's books, including Camilo's favourite picture book, at a used book store. He was able to collect some good toys from friends whose children had outgrown them and he joined a toy library where he could borrow toys for free. He bought some inexpensive shelves and put one beside each boy's bed, and another in the living room where he created a little play area. The next time the boys came they spent one afternoon decorating the walls with pictures the boys drew and others they cut out from magazines. Enrique could tell that his place was starting to feel like their place too.*

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

### What Your Children Need

All children have basic needs which are the same in all family structures. Fathers meet these needs through the different roles they play.

Children of separated parents have special needs as well:

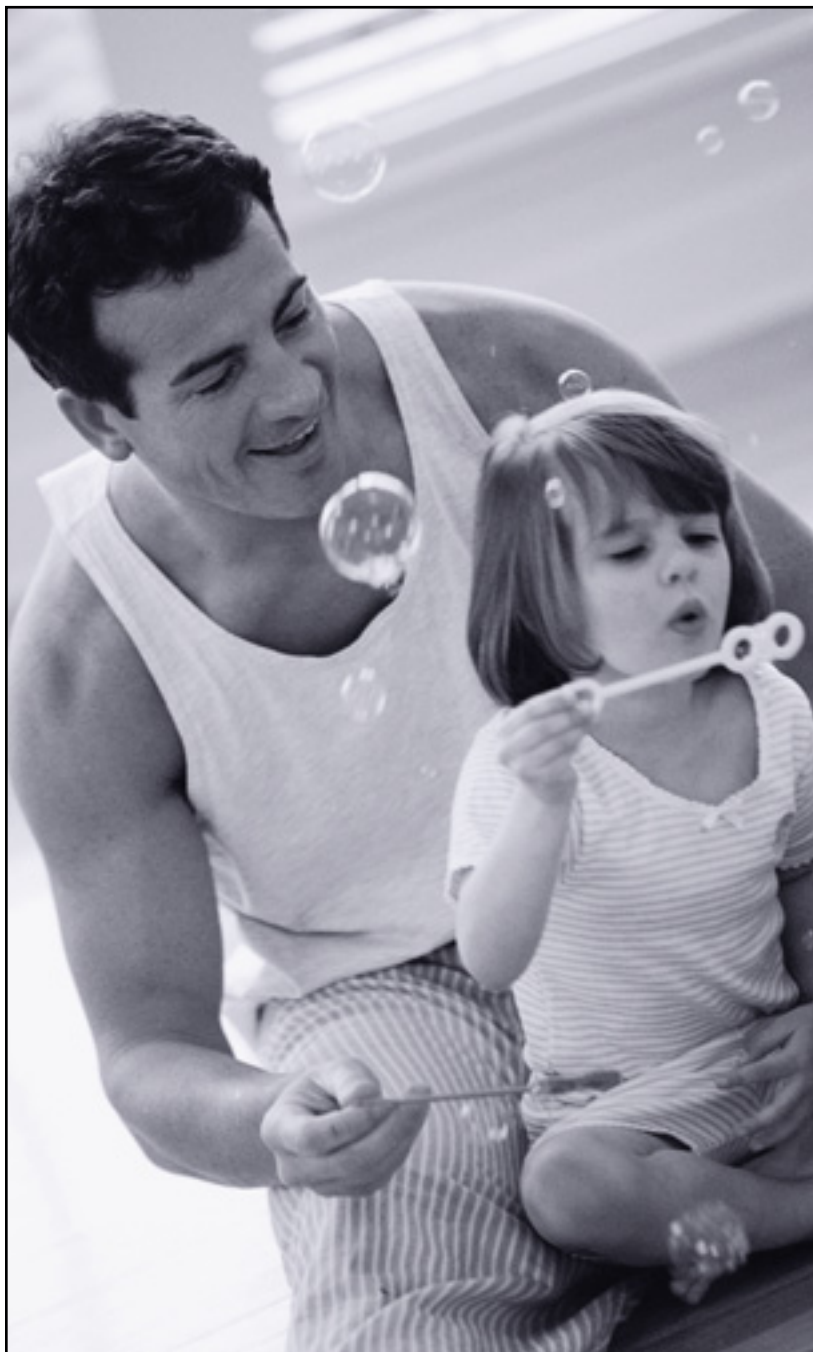
- A good relationship with both Dad and Mom.
- Protection from conflict that may occur after divorce or separation.
- Stability and security. Mom and Dad don't have to parent in exactly the same way, but both need to offer good parental care and stable routines.

## chapter two

# Your Children's Feelings

We know that children are sad and fearful when their parents split up, and most need lots of help understanding why it happened. But some of the feelings children have about their parent's separation might surprise you.

- **Am I going to lose my Dad?** Children may worry that if Mom and Dad have stopped loving each other, one of them might stop loving their children too.
- **Is my Dad going to be OK?** They may worry that your unhappiness and turmoil will prevent you from being the same person they've always known.
- **This was my fault.** It may be obvious to you that adult problems caused the separation, but it's not obvious to kids, especially if they feel caught between angry parents.
- **I hope Mom and Dad get back together again.** This is probably the secret (or not so secret) wish of most children whose parents are divorced. Parents need to be gently honest about the future of their relationship.
- **I would rather be with Mom today.** If your children live primarily with their mother, at times their loyalty may seem to be with her. This is not necessarily an indication of their feelings about you, but more that they are used to being with their mother. Young children are creatures of habit. Sometimes it takes them awhile to get used to a different situation.



## **Dad and Mom: Helping Their Children**

*Pierre had worried about how the divorce would affect his kids. With two-year-old Bastien, it was hard to tell. He toddled around like normal. But even a year later, it was obvious that six-year-old Danielle still felt pretty bad at times. Sometimes when something went wrong, she would dissolve into tears and say, “Why can’t it just be like it was before, when we were all happy?” “I have to help her with this,” Pierre thought. Luckily, Pierre and his ex-partner, Martine, got along fairly well and they had a talk one night after the children were in bed. Pierre discovered that Martine was worried about Danielle too. They agreed to work together to help her understand several things:*

- 1. She and Bastien didn’t cause the separation.*
- 2. Dad and Mom both still love them.*
- 3. It’s OK to love both Mom and Dad.*
- 4. It’s OK to talk to Mom or Dad about how she feels.*

*“I think she’s been worried about you too,” said Martine. “She knows you’ve been unhappy and she needs to know that you are going to be OK: that you’ll still be the same Dad she knows.”*

*“But I’ve already talked to her about all that stuff, haven’t you?” Pierre asked. “Yes, I have,” she replied. “But I think young kids need to be reassured over and over again. It’s going to take her awhile to get over this.” They agreed to talk again in one month.*

## **Actions Speak Louder than Words**

It’s important for children to be reassured with words, but how you act may be even more important than what you say. For example, if you tell your children that it’s OK to love Mom too, and then speak badly of her in front of them, they may wonder if they have to choose between the two of you.

## Resiliency. Kids can bounce back

We could wish a lot of things for our children, but one of the best gifts we could ever give them is resiliency: that's the ability to bounce back, to face stressful situations and deal with them. That's a quality children develop throughout childhood with the help of their parents. They need to learn that we all feel badly sometimes, but we can feel happy again with the help of people who care about us and by helping ourselves. Helping children to develop resiliency begins with the simple act of comforting your crying baby. As children grow it becomes a combination of providing comfort when they need it, teaching them to think of solutions to problems and having a hopeful attitude. Children of separated parents probably have some added stress, but with our help they can be resilient too.

### Feeling Like a Dad Again

*Ram couldn't wait to see Ganesh again. He'd been on a business trip and it had been two weeks since he had last seen his three-year-old. But things got off to a rough start. First Ganesh cried when it was time to get in the car. Then when they got to Ram's place he wouldn't eat his dinner. Suddenly, Ram was in a bad mood. Then he started to get angry about being in a bad mood. He had looked forward to this so much. "I don't want to feel like this for the whole weekend," he thought.*

*Then Ram remembered the one thing that always seemed to cheer up his three-year-old — a bath. He had planned to take Ganesh out to a movie, but that seemed like a disaster waiting to happen. As he watched Ganesh play happily with his boats, Ram felt himself relax. He let Ganesh stay in the bath extra long that night. Then they had some Cheerios together, read some stories and Ram sat beside Ganesh while he fell asleep. He felt like a Dad again.*

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

### Your Children's Feelings

- Children of separated and divorced parents need lots of help dealing with their questions, fears and feelings.
- Children need to know that Mom and Dad both love them and that it's OK to love both Mom and Dad.
- Fathers need to be attentive to children's moods and emotional needs.
- Fathers can help children to develop resiliency: the ability to bounce back from stressful situations.





## chapter three

# Your Ex-partner: Working things out

Your ex-spouse may not be the person you would like to think about right now. But regardless of the status of your relationship, the two of you will always be the biological parents of your children. That doesn't change. What will change is the kind of relationship you have and the way you work together.

### **A Different Kind of Relationship**

When you were together, your relationship was an intimate one. You saw each other daily and knew a lot about each other's lives. It's different now. You are no longer marriage partners, you are co-parents. Your relationship should be less personal and more business-like. You'll talk less about your personal lives and mostly about the interest you have in common: your children. It's a big change and it will take time and effort for both of you to make the adjustment. At first you may have to establish certain boundaries, for example, by making a conscious effort to talk less about personal things.

### **Teamwork**

Being on the same "team" as your ex-partner may seem like an impossible idea, particularly if there are some hard feelings involved, but your children will benefit if you can find a way to work together on at least some level. The idea of a business relationship may help. Looking at your association with your ex-partner in this way may help you to separate your parenting from any strong personal feelings you may have about her.

## Parenting Differences

*Like most couples, Marcello and Elena had not always agreed about how best to parent their children, but after the separation the differences in their parenting styles seemed to be exaggerated. Elena had always been more protective and more reluctant to let Alyssa and Nico take risks. Now it seemed to Marcello that she was obsessed with it. He wanted to buy Nico some roller blades, but Elena thought it was too dangerous. “Does she think I’m a complete idiot?” Marcello thought. Eventually it got so bad that she was calling every time the kids were at his house to see what they were doing. Marcello’s lawyer suggested that they try family mediation. The mediator explained that it was OK if Dad did things a little differently than Mom as long as the differences were not too great and he helped them to agree on some basic ground rules about their children’s safety. This helped Elena feel a little more comfortable about Marcello’s judgement. The mediator also showed them that while it was not a good idea to constantly second-guess the other person’s judgement, it was important to exchange useful information in a neutral way: “Nico is just getting over a cold. He may be a little extra tired tonight.” “Alyssa’s best friend just moved and she’s still upset about it.”*

*Marcello and Elena agreed to limit most of their communication to information about the children that the other person really needed to know and to keep their personal opinions out of it. They argued less after that.*

## **Negotiating Peacefully**

Parents who live together sometimes fight about their children. When parents live separately and share parenting, there seem to be many more reasons for conflict about the children. Some of the problems may be due to emotional tension between Mom and Dad, but the disagreements can also be about practical things like schedules, differences in parenting style and money. Peaceful negotiation becomes a very important and necessary co-parenting skill. It reduces the chance of unpleasant and tense confrontations, and it can also help both ex-partners to be more effective parents.

## **Not all Conflict is Bad**

Constant conflict between ex-partners is bad for children, but it's also true that there are different kinds of conflict and not all of it is harmful. There is a difference between conflict that is primarily aimed at "winning" or getting back at someone and conflict that is about two people who disagree trying to stand up for what they believe in and work things out. That can be productive. However, productive conflict can easily turn nasty because of harsh words or critical comments. It's important to respond to issues instead of reacting emotionally to something that was said or done.

When you're tempted to argue, try to stop first and ask yourself, "Is this an important point that is worth discussing or is the real issue here that I don't want to let her have her way again?" If it's the latter you might want to think twice. Do you really have something to gain here? Also consider what this disagreement might cost you in terms of your relationship with your children and how you may feel when the confrontation is over.

## What Negotiation Offers You

Ongoing conflict between ex-partners often works against the interests of separated fathers. So effective negotiation offers you a better chance at peace with your ex-spouse and a good relationship with your children. Obviously, it takes two to negotiate and when one partner won't cooperate it's hard to make it work. The most you may be able to do at first is lead by example. If your ex-partner sees that you are sincerely interested in what's good for the children as opposed to gaining the upper hand or controlling her, she may relax and be more willing to work with you. But above all, you don't want to become drawn into a battle that may hurt your best interests with your children.\*

\*This is not meant to suggest that separated fathers should not pursue legal solutions to legitimate problems.

### A Tough Choice

*Two weekends a month wasn't enough. Liam wanted to see his daughter more often than that, so he decided to start going to school events. "Why shouldn't I? She's my daughter too," he thought. But his ex-partner saw it as an attempt to exert control over her. When Liam showed up at the school open house, Shelly glared at him, took Lisa by the hand and stomped out. He started to follow her, but she turned and shook her finger at him. "You shouldn't be here!" she said. Liam phoned Shelly to talk about it, but she hung up on him. At the next open house, he went again and, once again, Shelly took Lisa home. Liam was furious, but he realized that this tactic wasn't working. All it did was create a confrontation and he didn't really see Lisa. It was a bitter pill to swallow, but Liam decided that he would not be able to attend these school events until things calmed down between him and Shelly.*

## Practical Tips for Reducing Conflict

Some separated couples have little trouble working together. Others have enormous difficulty. If you are in a high-conflict co-parenting situation, or if you just want to maintain a good working relationship, here are some ideas that might help you to avoid or reduce conflict:

- Agree upon a schedule and stick to it. Be on time to pick the children up and bring them back. Negotiate schedule changes that have to do with your work timetable or recreational activities in advance, not at the last minute.
- If you go to her house, act like a visitor. Knock on the door. Don't act like you used to live there. Respect her territory.
- If there are a lot of problems during exchanges, use a neutral site like a restaurant or shopping centre (ie. not your house or her house) for picking up and dropping off the children. Try taking a friend with you. You both might act more calmly if someone else is observing.
- Avoid talking about the children during the exchange. Set up another time.
- Use letters to exchange essential information. If necessary create your own fill-in-the-blanks form. That will help you stick to content and avoid inflammatory language or accusations.
- Be very explicit when exchanging information. When you lived together you probably assumed that the other knew certain things without being told. Don't assume that any more.
- Don't use the children as messengers. Adult communication should be between adults.
- If possible, minimize the amount of clothing, toys and other items that go back and forth between houses. Provide your ex-spouse with a list of items from your house that need to be returned and ask her to do the same for you. This reduces the chance of disputes over missing items.

## Misunderstandings

*“How was your camping trip with Mom?” asked Nelson. “Mommy left me in the campsite one day while she went hiking with Karl and she wouldn’t let me go swimming.” Nelson could feel himself getting worked up. He felt that his ex-wife paid less attention to the children when she was with her new boyfriend, Karl. “What’s she doing leaving them alone like that?” he thought. He was about to call Athena and give her a blast, but just then the phone rang. It was his friend Tony who had been divorced for 15 years. Tony listened. Then he said, “I wouldn’t jump to conclusions here.” Tony explained that when his kids told him something about their mother that bothered him, he’d often find out later that they hadn’t given him the whole story. “I think kids don’t always understand or remember all the reasons why something happened,” he said. “I also think that they sometimes get the idea that we want to hear bad things about the other parent. So they tell you about the bad stuff that happened, but not the good stuff.” He encouraged Nelson to check it out with Athena, but not until the next day when he’d calmed down.*

*It turned out that Maura had been left at the campsite because she refused to go on the hike, and that her 15-year-old cousin Cheri had been with her. The reason they couldn’t go swimming was because of a thunderstorm.*

*The next time Maura said, “Mommy yelled at me,” Nelson said, “I guess you didn’t like that. Tell me about something fun that happened at your Mom’s house.” “Oh,” said Maura “You know what? We watched this really cool video called Matilda and...”*

*Soon, Nelson saw that there wasn’t much to worry about.*

## **A New Beginning**

When you enter into a business relationship in the world of work, you usually try hard to make a good impression so your new associate can develop confidence in you. That's what you have to do with your ex-partner now. Make a good name for yourself.

In the beginning, your ex-partner may worry about the children when they are with you. It may seem like she doesn't trust you as a parent. That's possible. Ex-partners often don't trust each other after separating. However, it could also be that she's having trouble getting used to the idea of you being in charge. Most mothers are used to having a lot of influence over their children and being in charge of them every day. That's hard to give up. You may have felt that way yourself.

You're not responsible for how she feels, but what you can do is show her that she doesn't need to worry because you are good at looking after your children. It's not a question of meeting her expectations – you don't need to parent in exactly the way she wants you to. And there's no point in trying to tell her you can do the job; she needs to see it. But make sure she can tell that the basics are covered. Be reliable and competent. Be positive. If the children come back to her clean, well-dressed, well-fed and properly rested, with stories to tell her about the neat things they did at Dad's house, she will develop confidence in your parenting abilities. That gives you a better chance of establishing a good working relationship that, in the long run, will help both you and your children.



## CHAPTER SUMMARY

### Your Ex-Partner: Working Things Out

- After separation parents should switch from a personal relationship to more of a business relationship. That may take some special effort.
- It's best for children if their separated parents work as a team as much as possible.
- Negotiation is one of the most important skills for divorced and separated fathers.
- Keeping conflict with your ex-spouse to a minimum is good for your children and good for you as well.
- Some conflict between ex-spouses is due to misunderstandings or incomplete information that comes from children. Remember to “check it out.”

## chapter four

# Fatherhood After Separation: Challenges and Personal Issues

Fathers who want to stay positively involved with children after separation often face significant challenges. One factor is time. It's harder to be a father when time with your children is denied or severely limited. But even if that's not the case, other factors can make it more difficult to be an effective involved father.

### **Work**

Work has always cut into fathers' time with children, but after separation it can be more complicated. Fathers may feel they have to work longer hours in order to meet financial obligations. Those who share time equally with ex-partners may have trouble juggling child care obligations with work schedules. Fathers who work shifts or have a job where overtime is common may have to arrange child care at unusual hours. Obviously what these fathers need is a good child care arrangement: friends or babysitters who can fill in from time to time, and ideally, an understanding employer. Not all employers are flexible, but the only way to find out is to sit down with your boss, explain the situation and see if something can be worked out.

### **Self Esteem**

Most people's self esteem suffers after a relationship ends. That's worth thinking about because it's hard to be the best parent you can be when you aren't feeling good about yourself. It's harder to be confident about your decisions, it's harder to

keep your cool sometimes and it's harder to interact positively with your kids.

If you feel that poor self esteem may be affecting your interactions with your children, it's important to do something about it. There is no magic pill to repair damaged self-esteem. Self-esteem is restored gradually. What helps is emotional support from those who care about you, persisting through adversity and making the most of whatever successes you have.

### **“Your Kids Still Need You.”**

*Things had gotten to a pretty low point for Matt. His ex-wife had left him for another man, he had money problems and he didn't see his kids very much. One day he was talking to his sister about it. “I don't know what to do,” Matt began. “Another man is living in my house. He sees my kids more than I do. I don't feel like much of a father these days.”*

*“I can see why you feel that way,” she said. “But you can't give up. Your kids still need you. Remember last week when you brought them over to my place and Tanya fell and scraped her knee? I tried to comfort her, but she wanted you.*

*Remember that? That tells me that you're still very important to her. I know your situation is kind of rotten right now, but when I look at your kids, I can see that they're doing OK. I think you can take some of the credit for that.”*

*Matt hadn't looked at it that way, and the more he thought about it, the more he agreed that, all things considered, his children weren't doing that badly. The big problem was how he felt. Matt resolved to do something about it. He bought a book about fathering after divorce and he joined a support group for divorced fathers. It was a relief to talk things over with other men who were going through the same thing. Matt began to feel more hopeful and he also saw that as he felt better, he enjoyed his children even more.*



## **Tough Feelings**

- **Grief and Loss**

For some people it may be a relief when the marriage finally ends, but for others it's like being hit with a pile of bricks. You may feel a profound sense of loss — loss of a partner, loss of a former life, loss of time with children. Some fathers go through various stages of shock, denial, confusion and sadness as they come to terms with their situation. These are deep and painful feelings and it will take some time to get through them. That's normal.

- **Stress**

Even if you have had a relatively “easy” separation, you're going through a big change right now and big change is stressful. Your stress may be emotional, financial or it may just be that the practical details of your life have become more complicated. All this can affect your interactions with your kids. So look after yourself, particularly when you are not with them. Eating properly and getting enough rest and exercise are good ways to start dealing with stress. It may also help to sit down and list some of the aspects of your life that are causing stress. You won't be able to eliminate all of them (or even most of them) but you may see a way to reduce some of the demands on your life. By looking after your stress you're doing a favour to your children.

- **Fear**

Newly separated fathers often feel very uncertain about the future. “Will I be able to meet my increased financial commitments? Will I be able to be the kind of father I dreamed of being? Will I lose contact with my children?” Dealing with these fears will also take time.

- **Anger**

It is normal to be angry after a separation. You may blame your partner. She may blame you as well. The important thing is what you do with that anger. In particular, it's important to do everything you can to make sure that it affects your children as little as possible.

## **Dealing With Anger**

*Jason was furious. Everything about the divorce had been unfair. He had supported his wife while she went to college and looked after his child at night so she could do her school work. Then she got sole custody because the judge thought there was too much conflict. Jason was limited to two weekends a month with his four-year-old daughter Erin and he was required to visit a social worker with her once a month.*

*On this particular day, he had gone to pick up Erin but his ex-wife said that Erin was having a nap. "Come back in an hour," she said. Jason went to a donut shop and sat there getting more angry by the minute. By the time he got to the social worker's office he was ready to spout off. "That bitch," he hissed. "She pulls this crap every time." As Jason ranted and raved the social worker sat quietly. When Jason was finished, he glared at the social worker, who looked at him and said, "Can we talk about something else for a minute? Look at your daughter. How do you think she's feeling right now?"*

*Jason looked at Erin. She was sitting in the corner hugging her doll tightly, rocking back and forth. One tear rolled slowly down her cheek. "I think she's scared," the social worker said. "I understand that you're upset, but I don't think that seeing you act like this is helping her."*

*Jason had to admit the social worker was right. He needed to think less about his ex-wife and more about Erin's needs and feelings.*

## **Separate Your Feelings About Her From Your Parenting**

There's no use pretending that hard feelings like anger, resentment and mistrust don't exist after a family breakdown. One of the most important things you can do for yourself and your children is to learn to separate those feelings from your parenting. If anger, frustration or depression are playing a dominant role in your life, you have to talk to somebody about it. That person could be a professional counsellor, a group of other divorced fathers who understand what you've been through or even a close friend. You may think that you should be able to deal with this on your own or that seeking outside help is a sign of failure. In fact, seeking outside help shows that you are good father who wants to protect his children.

## **Finding Support**

There are a number of support and educational groups that can be of assistance to separated fathers. Some are designed to teach parenting skills and may include both mothers and fathers from both single parent and two parent families. Others may be for fathers of children with special needs, those experiencing specific problems or father support/discussion groups of a general nature. Your workplace employee assistance plan may be able to help you find some services and may even cover the cost of some professional services. Groups for divorced fathers are also out there, but they often operate independently and can be hard to find. Family lawyers, mediators or other divorced fathers may know of one in your area. If there aren't any and you are willing to do some organizing, staff at a family resource centre or family service agency may be willing to help you start your own group.

## **New Relationships**

Some separated men become involved in new relationships fairly quickly. This can be an exciting, positive new beginning in your life, but it's important to think about how these new relationships affect your children.

- **Take it slow**

You may be eager to have your children get to know your new friend, but it's going to be very strange to see Dad with another woman and it will take time for them to get used to it. So don't try to make her a full part of their life with you at first. Remember also that if your children develop a bond with your new girlfriend they may be hurt again if this relationship ends. That doesn't mean they can't meet her and see her sometimes, but keep her at a bit of a distance until you are sure that your new relationship is a very committed one. When the relationship becomes serious, your children need to understand that this person is very important to you. They may wonder if that means they have become less significant in your life, so you need to tell and show them that you still love and care about them just as much.

- **Caught in the Middle**

Your ex-partner may have negative feelings about your new girlfriend and if your children figure this out it puts them in a difficult position. If they like her, does it mean they are disloyal to their Mom? You could find yourself caught in the middle of any tension that develops between your ex-spouse and your new partner. In time, it's possible that the two of them could become friends and that could be a very good thing for you. However, to begin with it may be best if contact between the two of them is limited and she stays out of interactions between you and your ex-partner, particularly if things are a little tense. If she wants to help, explain that she can do that by being there for you when you are feeling frustrated or upset. Handle negotiations with your ex-partner yourself.



## CHAPTER SUMMARY

### Fatherhood After Separation: Challenges & Personal Issues

- Separated fathers are often dealing with significant personal issues that can affect the relationship with their children and their parenting as well.
- If you are having problems like low self esteem or anger it's important to deal with those issues for your own sake and for the sake of your children.
- Learn to separate your personal feelings about your ex-partner from your relationship with your children and your parenting. Seeking outside help if you need it shows that you care about your children.
- Your new relationships affect your children. Bring a new person into your children's lives gradually and carefully.

## c h a p t e r   f i v e

# The Parent You'd Like To Be

Chances are that, right now, being a good father feels more important than ever, but harder to do. If that's the way you feel, it's a good idea to consider some other factors that may be having an impact on your parenting right now.

### **Dealing with Change**

No one needs to tell you that separation is a big change. It will take time for you and your children to get used to your new living arrangement. Some seem to adapt fairly easily, but others take more time and may not respond to you normally at first. They may misbehave more than usual, or act anxious or even shy. The best advice anyone can give you is to be patient: patient with yourself and with your children. It won't feel normal at first. It will feel more "normal" in time, however "normal" will not be the same as it was in the past.

The other big change is that you are now a single parent. So if you shared responsibilities with your partner, you have to adjust to having total responsibility when you are with your children.

### **Staying in Touch**

One of the biggest problems for separated fathers is feeling a loss of connection with their children. Here are some ideas for maintaining your connection when you can't be with them.

- If possible, move to a home in your child's neighbourhood. This will be more convenient for you and it will be especially helpful when your children are older and their friends and activities become very important to them.
- Phone your child to say good night.
- Once a week or so, write your child a little letter and tell her what you did that day. Fathers with older children may be able to keep in touch by e-mail.
- Get involved with your child's school. Get to know her teachers and the principal. Attend school functions.
- Make an audiotape of yourself reading her favourite story.
- Collect interesting items for your children when you are apart from them. You can say, "I was thinking about you when I saw this." Younger children might enjoy a pretty rock or wildflower. For older children it might be a funny comic cut out of the newspaper.
- Offer to "babysit" for your ex-partner.

### **Getting It Together**

*Neville found it very quiet in his new apartment. No sound of children. No conversation. Then Caitlin and Jeremy would come over and suddenly he was very, very busy. Neville quickly discovered that he had some things to learn. When he and his wife were together she had looked after certain aspects of child care and household work completely. Neville wasn't used to keeping track of details like what food was in the house and when the children's lessons and activities were. But after awhile, he was surprised to find out that he enjoyed it. When the kids were with him, he liked being in charge and it felt good to know that he knew how to take care of them by himself. Neville felt needed and competent.*



## High Conflict Relationship?

If there is a lot of friction between you and your ex-partner, you will have to be more careful about how you maintain your connection with your child. It's possible that your attempts to maintain contact will be seen as attempts to control your ex-partner or set up more opportunities to fight with her. If this is the case, you may have to communicate with her separately so she understands what your intentions are.

## Feelings and Parenting

One of the biggest challenges for divorced fathers is that strong feelings can get in the way of good parenting. This happens to all parents sometimes, but after separation there is an increased risk. You can have the best intentions and the best plans, but then something happens between you and your ex-partner and boom, you're furious again and all your good intentions go out the window.

### What to do:

- **Avoid situations that are likely to upset you.** Get to know these situations and stay away from them if you can. That may mean that your contact with your ex-partner has to be very limited for awhile.
- **Take a time out.** Sometimes you just have to walk away and shut up. That doesn't mean that you have to let the issue drop, but sometimes it's best to wait until you (or both of you) have calmed down. Then you have a better chance of resolving the issue in a productive way.
- **Don't take it out on your kids.** All parents do this sometimes, but try to do it as little as possible. Keep telling yourself that your children are the innocent bystanders in all of this and that what they need from you is love and positive attention, not anger.

- **Get help.** If strong feelings are a big part of your life (there may be a very good reason for that), get help. Take an anger management course or find someone to talk to: a counsellor or a close friend who doesn't mind listening to your anger.
- **Forgive yourself.** People in stressful situations sometimes lose their temper. All you can do is admit that what you did was wrong, apologize and try to do better. Forgive yourself for being human.
- **Try to have some fun.** Few things are better for stress than enjoying yourself. So find time for activities and friendships that make you feel good.
- **Stay focussed on your big goal.** Every time you feel the intense anger coming on, ask yourself, "Is this helping my relationship with my child?"

## A Real Dad

Fathers who don't see their children very often want their time together to feel special. That's only natural, but if your time with your child is all treats, gifts and amusement parks it isn't "real." What is real, and what matters most, is your relationship with your children and the quality of your interaction with them. In fact, research has shown that, of all the possible ways fathers can positively influence children, it is the closeness a child feels to his father that is most strongly associated with good life outcomes. Special outings can be enjoyable, but they can also involve travel, hurrying to be on time, waiting in line and other pressures that aren't very much fun for young children. Often you and your kids can feel just as much, or even more of that closeness when you are sharing a simple everyday activity like playing at a playground, building something with Lego, washing the car, having one of his friends over to play, taking a hike in the woods or going for a swim at a community pool. The fact that you are enjoying being together is more important than what you are actually doing.

### **A Real Good Time**

*Damian loved to eat at McDonald's and watch rented videos, and Anton usually went along with that because he wanted Damian to be happy. But he knew it wasn't good for Damian to be eating too much fast food and once the video was on Damian became glued to the TV. Anton sometimes got bored and went to do something else. It wasn't really like being together. The next time Damian came he said, "We're going to do something special tonight. We're going to make our own pizza!" They went to the grocery store together where they bought a flatbread, some cheese and tomato sauce, and Damian picked out some pepperoni and bacon for toppings. At home Damian helped put everything on the pizza. When the evening was over Anton realized that they'd spent more time actually being together than if they'd done their usual McDonald's and a video. He could tell Damian liked it too. The next time he came over Damian said, "Remember when we made our own pizza?"*

### **Final Thoughts**

Fatherhood lasts the rest of your life. The situation you're in right now may not be ideal, but it can get better in time. Imagine the relationship you would like to have with your child in 5 years, in 10 years, in 20 years. Then think about the kind of actions on your part that will get you there. When it's all said and done your children may not remember how much time, money and energy you invested in fighting the system, but they will remember the time you spent with them. And when you look back you'll probably measure your fatherhood in terms of how well you were able to look after your children and meet their needs when they were with you and what you put into your relationship with them. This is what matters most in the end.

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

### The Parent You'd Like To Be

- Separation and divorce involve a tremendous amount of change. It takes time to adjust.
- Separated fathers need to get used to looking after all aspects of child care themselves.
- Look for lots of little ways to stay in touch with your children when you can't be with them.
- Strong feelings can sometimes get in the way of being the parent you want to be. Be aware of that and learn to deal with your feelings separately so you can be the father you want to be.
- Children of divorced parents need a "real Dad" not a special events Dad.



## What is the **Father Involvement Initiative – Ontario Network** all about?

The **Father Involvement Initiative - Ontario Network (FII-ON)** is a broad-based coalition of organizations and individuals who have come together to discuss, learn about and encourage the involvement of fathers in the lives of their children. The members of the network share the belief that the active involvement of caring, committed and responsible fathers promotes healthy development in children. The **FII-ON** participants also believe that father involvement promotes the development of resiliency, which is a child's ability to remain healthy and adaptive in the face of adversity.

Thus, within a population health approach, the **FII-ON** seeks to create partnership among various stakeholders (fathers, mothers, service providers, policy and decision-makers, employers and the business sector, labour organizations, professional associations, community-based coalitions, government and academic institutions, and the media), in pursuit of its ultimate goal: to be a catalyst in society's acknowledgment of and action upon our collective responsibility to involve fathers in development of healthy and resilient children.

[www.cfii.ca](http://www.cfii.ca)

