

PARENTING CONCERNS AT A TIME OF SEPARATION

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At a time of breakdown in the relationship between adults who are also parents, it is too easy for the needs of the children to be overlooked. However children need help too and parents often need help to do their best for their children at such a time. There is a growing body of opinion pointing to the following:

- There is nothing to suggest that children from divorced families must be damaged children.
- How children survive parental separation depends almost entirely on the extent to which they maintain relationships with both parents and the support both parents give them.
- Children can cope even with quite bitter divorces, provided any bitterness between the parents remains where it belongs - between the parents - and the children are not sucked into it.
- Step-parent relationships are generally no substitute for a child having a proper relationship with both birth parents.

The approach

- The process of divorce must not project the family into a war-zone but must be seen as a process to remedy a bad or unfortunate situation.
- A child must be led to understand that the process will end and that the parents will do all they can to ensure this happens as soon as possible.
- The temptation to compete for the endorsement and support of children must be resisted.
- Separating parents often need to appreciate that the change in their circumstances creates significant changes in both themselves and in their former partner. Whilst together in a relationship, each parent specialises in roles and may well have allowed financial or caring or practical skills to atrophy or stagnate. After separation these skills may develop quickly - they will often have to! A few years later separated partners are often astounded by how much competence has been developed by the other and how quickly.

Information at the time of breakdown

- Confronted by the separation of their parents, children may feel powerless and may be reduced to panic. They may need increased support but may find it difficult to secure this from parents in their own personal turmoils.
- Children who are not given information are likely to create more terrible fantasies.
- An might involve the following:-
 - Both parents agree how the children will be told and what will be said
 - All the children are told together by both parents
 - Some warning of the separation should be given to prepare them to some extent – although many children are very sensitive and are surprised at how long their parents take to realise the relationship is at end and then to tell them!
 - The children are told why the separation is necessary. No blame is laid on either parent. Even something as bland as "we married because we thought we would love each other forever and now we don't and we are only making each other unhappy; we have tried everything and we

found that we must part" shows that the decision to separate has been a rational and careful one.

- The fact that the parents feel sad about what has happened shows their concern about the children and therefore assists in the building of the children's self esteem. Going into the details of the reasons for the separation can easily develop into a litany of criticism and be a cause of problems in itself.
 - Children should be told about the immediate practical consequences of the separation, which should have been agreed in advance by the parents.
 - It is possible - indeed probable - that all practical arrangements cannot be agreed because they are not been resolved (e.g. housing / finances). However, at least the children should be told what is certain and told that although matters may be messed up for a while, a resolution will be achieved and both parents will do all they can to achieve it as soon as possible.
 - Ideally the children should be told where each parent will be living; with whom the children will be primarily living; who will be looking after them; and how visiting arrangements will work.
- If the children are allowed to contribute to these discussions, their sense of powerlessness may be reduced - but giving them inappropriate power or "say" in decisions must be avoided. Parents must remain parents and remain in control.
 - Very often children will be unable to take on board this sort of information, at least in one go. Where they are of different ages further separate discussions may need to take place so that the information can begin to be taken on board at the child's own level and understanding.

The relationship between the parents

- Parents must not involve the children in the resolution of their conflicting interests.
- However difficult, parents must give their children permission for them to love both parents.
- Parents should share how children are behaving and reacting, not as a source of criticism or blame but so that both can help the children when the children are with each parent.

It is very helpful if a child is able to see that their parents are still talking together over his/her future. The child who is used to pass messages, told not to disclose information and asked for declarations of loyalty will suffer the most.

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