



Handout #24

# When Families Separate

## What Parents and Providers Can Do

*Healthy Children, Strong Families, Caring Communities*

### This handout discusses:

- How to cope when families separate
- What is the provider's role?

### Redefining Your Family

Ending a relationship brings a variety of feelings and emotions to the parents and children involved. There may be feelings of relief, anger or confusion. Once parents have made the decision to separate or divorce, it's important to let children know what changes to expect and to reassure them that the situation is NOT their fault.

Parents should maintain a communicative relationship for the welfare of their children. How well children adjust to the separation depends upon how well the adults in their lives treat each other. Parents and caregivers need to be aware of any changes in a child's behavior, sleeping patterns or eating habits. Young children "act out" because they do not know how to express their feelings any other way.

### Parents should consider the following:

- Tell your children often that you love them. Children need to know they are loved
- Control your anger. Children are very sensitive to bickering, loud arguments or long periods of silence
- Seek out adult support and networking groups to avoid relying on your children for emotional support
- Take time to do fun activities with your children which focus on creative interests such as: craft projects, painting, gardening or going to the library together. Developing interests with your children during times of stress helps them feel more secure
- Don't make too many changes at one time and keep your child and

- caregiver informed of upcoming schedule changes or appointments
- Younger children need shorter, more frequent contact with both parents
- Plan for the transition between households to include helping children pack appropriate clothes or homework
- Have their favorite comfort items, such as a blanket, doll or stuffed toy at both households so the child feels "at home" in both locations
- Communication is essential in order to share important information regarding the children
- Stress impacts children in all their relationships and also affects their ability to cope in school or child care.

### The Healing Process for Children

Consider beginning a scrapbook with your children that allows them to preserve family pictures, remember events and special occasions. Discuss with the other parent how you can encourage younger children to write and draw in a journal about their experiences in each household. Leave it up to the children to decide what is to be included in their books or journals. They most likely will want to share their scrapbooks and information with both parents. A shared "family" project such as this can help restore unity.

Using terms like "Mom's house" or "Dad's house" implies that children don't have a house to call their own. Consider other terms like "my apartment" and "my blue house." Strive to be a good role model to your children:

- Find ways to increase your

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- communication skills
- Use appropriate language
- Find alternative ways to handle stress and anger.

It's important to focus on your own healing while recognizing you have no control over your ex-partner's emotions and behavior. Concentrate on what is important for your children. Make a commitment to co-parenting and redefining your family to include two households. One big challenge is maintaining regular communication with your ex-partner. Don't complain about the other parent to your children. DO NOT make the children messengers for schedule changes or complaints. Recognize that it's going to take time to work out these new arrangements, and mediation may be necessary to avoid a crisis.

Children deserve the love of both parents and from members of their extended families. If you feel the children are not safe with a parent or family member it is important to get professional help immediately. With the help of professionals you can learn appropriate ways to resolve the unsafe situation.

## The Provider's Role

Usually one or both parents believe that ending their marriage will free them to create happier, emotionally healthier lives for themselves and their children. However, divorce can be an extremely stressful situation for parents, children, family members, friends and child care providers.

This is especially true when parents cannot agree about child care and transportation arrangements: Who will drop off the children and who forgot to bring what? Who will pick them up and who was late again? If this argumentative behavior is brought into the child care environment, it puts the children and provider in the middle.

During a divorce or separation, emotions can run high. The results may cause parents to make unwise remarks in front of their children or

make inappropriate requests of their caregiver. It's important that the caregiver keep this in mind when working with the parents.

The provider should not mimic the parent's inappropriate remarks to the children. Belittling or complaining to the children about their parents is never okay. Children could interpret this as telling them to change a situation which they have no control over. Many children actually believe they are to blame for their parents' break-up.

Another provider responsibility is to make sure children leave their home safely in the hands of parents. Until custody and visitation arrangements are decided through the court system, parents may make informal living and child care arrangements. It's important to know exactly what those arrangements are. If the situation becomes difficult, the provider may require parents to sign a written agreement regarding transportation. If parents give conflicting stories, the caregiver can request a copy of court papers stating custody and terms of visitation.

**Remember**, the caregiver is legally bound to follow custody and visitation arrangements stated in court papers. Following are some commonly used terms regarding child custody:

- **Joint Custody:** Both parents have the responsibility and rights as to the care and welfare of the child.
- **Physical Custody:** The parent with physical custody is the one with whom the child lives.
- **Sole Custody (with visitation):** One parent has all the responsibility and rights as to the care and welfare of the child. The child may visit the other parent on specified days.
- **Sole Custody (without visitation):** One parent has all the responsibility and rights as to the care and welfare of the child. The child may not visit the other parent.

- **Sole Custody (supervised visitation):** One parent has all the responsibility and rights as to the care and welfare of the child. The child may visit the other parent with the presence and supervision of a third party.

## Emergencies & Special Occasions

There may be times when parents need an "unauthorized" person (such as a family friend) to pick up their child. In this situation, require the parent to supply a signed and dated note. The note should state the person's name for that instance, specifying dates and times. The parent should contact the provider prior to the special instance or emergency to confirm the arrangements.

## Additional Resources:

More information can be found in the handbook: "Child Custody Disputes: With Whom Can The Child Go Home?" To order, contact the Child Care Law Center, 22 Second Street, 5th Floor, San Francisco, CA or call 415/495-5498.

Information is available on these web sites:

[www.singleparents.about.com](http://www.singleparents.about.com)  
[www.parentingtoolbox.com](http://www.parentingtoolbox.com)  
[www.singlemothers.org](http://www.singlemothers.org)  
[www.singlefather.org](http://www.singlefather.org)

- *The Parent/Child Manual on Divorce*, by Maria Sullivan
- *The Divorced Parent*, by Stephanie Marston
- *Mom's House/Dad's House*, by Isolina Ricci