



## The ABCs and 1,2,3s of Helping Children through the Divorce Process

### **A**cknowledgement: Telling Children of the Decision to Divorce

1. If possible, plan to tell the children together, so that the messages you are giving about the decision to divorce are uniform. Do not include specific information about the reasons for the divorce, but rather explain in more general terms, and do not speak poorly about your spouse. It is also generally never a good decision to discuss adult issues, such as infidelity, financial issues, difficulty with in-laws, etc. For one, with regard to self-image, on an internal level children see themselves as "half mom" and "half dad." Thus when parties tear one another down, it in turn tears down the child's own internal sense of self. Second, the child is left to try to understand adult issues through a child's or teenager's mind, which can lead to a lot of confusion and exacerbate difficulty in their adjustment to the divorce.
2. Messages that project the reality of the situation yet protect the child's emotions are:
  - Mom and Dad are going to get a divorce. (For younger children: That means that we aren't going to be married anymore, and that we won't live together.) This decision doesn't change the fact that we are still your parents, and it is in no way at all your fault. Being married isn't good for us anymore, but one good thing about it was that we had you, and we are so happy to have you.
  - While some things will change, like where we each live, one thing that will never change is how much we both love you, and how important you are to us.
  - We know that you might be sad or angry or upset about this, and we want you to talk to us about what you think and how you feel, so we can try to help you through this.
3. Prepare and practice ahead of time what you will say. Planning makes any communication go better. Be sure to also prepare for various reactions and how you will deal with them in the moment. For example, children may cry, beg you not to divorce, be angry, yell at you, slam doors, refuse to speak to you, or try to get you to change your mind. Conversely, some children who have been aware of conflict between you may say that they are not surprised. Children are concrete thinkers and may have many practical questions they ask, such as where everyone will live, when they will see each parent, what they will do on holidays and birthdays, or if they will have to move.

### **N**ew **B**eginnings: Transitioning a Family into Two Households

1. Keep as much routine and consistency as possible, while allowing for some flexibility to make the process flow smoothly. Similar routines, especially around getting off to school in the mornings, doing homework, and bedtime (even on weekends), make it easier for a child to go between households. Also, create a comfortable space for children in both households, to include a room of their own and toys, clothes, favorite foods, etc., that they don't have to carry back and forth.
2. While children do best with consistency, expecting rigidity in parenting can lead to unnecessary conflict. Allow your ex-spouse to be their own parent, and respect your different parenting styles. Divorce is a time of changing roles and responsibilities with regard to parenting; pre-divorce roles and responsibilities were divided based on two parents in one household, thus post-divorce is often a time of each parent learning how to do some of the things that used to be the "job" or "area" of the other parent. Avoid the thinking trap of, "It's always been this way..." and instead try to support one another, for the good of the child, in your respective development and strengthening of skills.

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3. Time with your child used to occur by happenstance to some extent. Time now takes more planning. Both parents want quality parenting time with their child, and a healthy relationship with each parent is in the best interests of the child. Maintaining contact between each parent and child is essential. This can be a difficult topic for parents to navigate, as they are driven by love for their child and an underlying fear of losing a close bond and relationship with the child due to divisions in time. Some helpful hints: (1) Think in terms of quality time versus exactly equal time. (2) Keep in mind that your children used to know that mom and dad lived at home with them, and even if mom and/or dad were busy some days, there was the underlying comfort of their presence. Make efforts during the transition phase for as much contact between each parent and child as is feasible to help them adjust. (3) Time and contact are not only in-person. Be creative about other ways to maintain contact, such as a goodnight call between parent and child being part of the daily bedtime routine. And/or quick phone or email messages of "I love you," "I'm thinking about you," or "How did your test go?" Keeping contact around the little things that happen in your child's day is a great way to stay connected. And remember that keeping contact is an adult responsibility – whether the child is age 6 or 16, it is the responsibility of the parent to take the lead in staying connected.

**Co-Parenting Effectively: Developing a Positive Shared-Parenting Relationship**

1. From the moment of separation you and your spouse begin functioning as co-parents, and how you manage this is vitally important to the well-being of your child. Research has shown that it is not the divorce per se but rather the amount of conflict associated with the divorce that has the most negative effects on children. If there is conflict between you and your ex-spouse, your child will be left to deal with an on-going stressful situation at an age when coping skills around stress are still in development and children are often not able to process such negativity between parents. Some hints to lessen your child's exposure to conflict: (1) Minimize the child's exposure to fighting. Have your disagreements well out of earshot, and remember that kids are experts at listening in. (2) Don't use your children as messengers or quiz them about your ex-spouse. The less the children feel a part of their parents' battle, the better. (3) Your children may be tempted to act as your confidant and caretaker. Resist the temptation to let them. Let your peers, adult family members, mental health professionals, etc., be your counselors. Let your children be children.

2. Regardless of the actual split of time spent with the child, co-parenting itself is an on-going situation. Thus the time to start lessening the conflict, and build a healthy co-parenting unit is now. Try to move beyond past hurt to forge an amicable co-parenting team for the benefit of your child (and for yourself as well). Components of a positive shared-parenting relationship: focus on effective and respectful communication, navigate differences in parenting styles and agree upon difficult topics, engage in low-conflict joint decision-making, compromise, and be a united front to the child.

3. Remember that you are your child's role model, and the message your behavior sends to your child is: This is the way people should act in this situation. Co-parenting is an opportunity to teach your child valuable lessons about how to get along with someone even when you disagree with them, how to compromise, and how to maintain positive and healthy relationships even in difficult circumstances. In building and maintaining your co-parenting relationship, think about the messages you are sending your child.

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*At Lepage Associates our largest area of expertise is helping adults and children who are going through separation and divorce. There are many ways we can be of help during the process: communication consultant, child specialist, co-parenting consultant, parenting plan expert, support person/therapist. Please call us or visit our website for more information, or call for an initial consult.*

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