

# **PARENTS HELPING CHILDREN**

## **COPE WITH DIVORCE**

**A Program for**

**Separating or Divorcing Parents**

**With Minor Children**

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# Parents Helping Children Cope With Divorce

## INTRODUCTION

Divorcing parents are often anxious about how the divorce will affect their children and for how long. It would be comforting to believe "time heals all wounds." Until recently, not much was known about the long term effects of divorce on children. We now know that growing up does become much more difficult for children of divorce. On top of normal development tasks there is an additional set of tasks specific to the divorce experience. Understanding those tasks can give parents some direction in helping children do more than just cope with the pain, chaos, and stress that comes with divorce.

Many divorcing parents experience a dilemma. At a time when their children are in great need of them, they are least emotionally available. This may result in spending less time and providing less discipline. It is precisely this disruption in parenting that hurts children far more than divorce itself. The degree and intensity of conflict before the divorce and duration of bitter conflict following will determine how prolonged this disruption will be. It is critically important, therefore, that parents seek all the support they can for themselves.

This booklet for separating or divorcing parents has three goals:

1. To provide information to help parents better understand the effects of divorce;
2. To help parents understand the needs of their children;
3. To promote parents' and children's adjustment to divorce.

The information has been drawn from the experience of the developers of the program and resources. Because each divorce and family situation is unique, readers are encouraged to consult other services available to divorced parents and their children. These include psychological services, parent support groups, emergency services, family court mediation services, conflict resolution and mediation agencies, and books relating to divorce. (Some of these can be found on pages 28-35 in the booklet.)

This booklet has been adapted primarily from one written by Lorraine N. Osthaus, Director of Family Counseling at the Oakland County Friend of the Court, in consultation with the SMILE program developers and the Friend of the Court staff in the 6th Judicial Court of Michigan. Appreciation is extended to the Honorable Edward Sosnick for permission to use these materials in other Michigan counties. Material has also been included from *Families First*, a support program developed by Beverly Bradburn-Stern and Richard C. Marley for Superior Court of Cobb County in Marietta, Georgia. The suggested readings list was prepared by Alice R. McCarthy, Ph.D., Director, Advisory Board Column, Parent Talk Page, Detroit Free Press and President of the Center for Advancement of the Family.

## ABOUT DIVORCE: SOME FACTS

- \* One out of every two couples marrying this year will be divorced in 10 years.
- \* 60% of divorces occur for people between the ages 25-39.
- \* Over 1,000,000 children are affected by divorce per year.
- \* Half will grow up in families where parents stay angry.
- \* Three in five will feel rejected by at least one of their parents.
- \* 70% of all children born in 1980 will spend time in a single parent family.
- \* 75% of women and 80% of men remarry within five years.
- \* Second marriages are at greater risk for ending than first marriages.
- \* By 1990, more people will be part of second marriages than first.

**DIVORCE BRINGS CHANGE.** Each year, over one million marriages end in divorce in the United States. When it happens, people feel alone and wonder how anyone gets through it. Every family member must adapt to a new way of living. The more parents know about divorce, the better they are able to cope with the changes and help their children adjust.

**DIVORCE IS PAINFUL.** Children feel hurt and helpless when parents divorce. They are emotionally attached to both parents, and most children want their parents to stay together. When divorce occurs, children, as well as parents, go through a grieving process which engenders feelings of disbelief, anger, sadness, and depression. Children experience a number of losses, including the loss of important relationships with family members and friends, changes in environment, loss of traditions established by the intact family, and loss of what the children themselves were like before the breakup of the family.

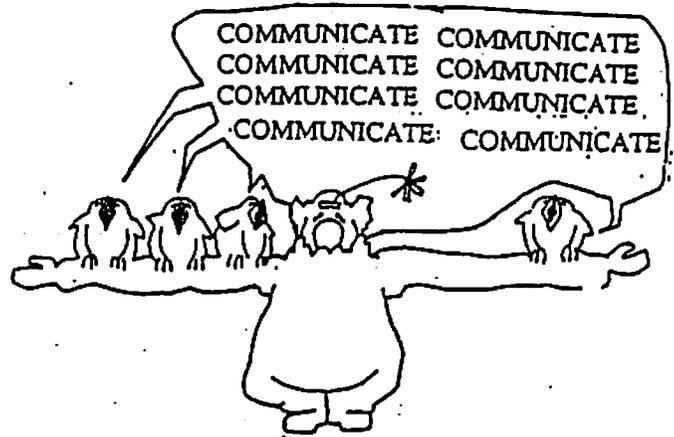
Parents experience pain and feeling of helplessness related to what happened during the marriage, events that occurred at the time of separation, and the divorce process. Divorce is an extremely difficult time, and parents tend to blame each other for problems. They sometimes do and say hurtful things to each other and are unaware of the negative impact their behavior has on children.

Legal aspects of divorce are easier to deal with than the emotional upheaval of divorce and the feelings that arise from the death of a relationship. Anger, disappointment, hurt, grief, and a desire for revenge are some normal reactions. Emotional turmoil can interfere with the mom and dad roles even though the husband and wife roles have ended.

## EXPERIENCE HAS TAUGHT US:

- \* The marriage may end -- the family does not.
- \* It is not the event of divorce or conflict between "spouses", but the conflict between "parents" that harms the child.
- \* Divorce is linked with problems such as depression, poor grades, fear, anger, alcohol and drug abuse, delinquency and child abuse.
- \* Through cooperative efforts, parents can prevent or minimize the negative impact of divorce on their children.

**HOW CHILDREN COME THROUGH THE DIVORCE** will depend on to the parents' relationship after the divorce and parents' relationship with their children. Parents' attitudes and actions make a big difference in how children adjust to the divorce. Parents may not be able to be friends after the divorce. However, the unfinished business of raising their children can be productive if the parents are civil and business-like in their dealings with each other and promote positive relationships with their children.



## THE DIVORCE PROCESS

Divorce is not an event that happens at the point one partner in the marriage physically moves out of the house. Divorce is a process that begins much earlier. Though partners may disagree on divorce as a solution, they almost always agree the marriage was in trouble.

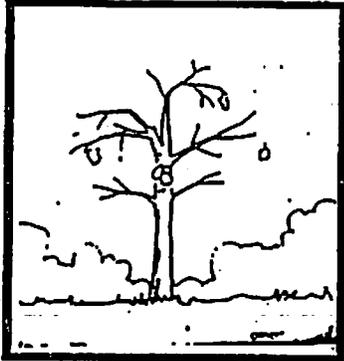
Divorce is an experience of loss that begins with loss of the hopes or dreams of what the marriage was to be. As the process evolves from disillusionment to the point of physical separation and beyond, changes impact the adults, children, and family in uniquely different ways. Adjustments are demanded for each. Paul Bohannon, a sociologist, identifies the following tasks:

### The Emotional Divorce

Emotional divorce is the process of grief for both parents and children. Adapting Dr. Kubler-Ross's model of grief for dealing with death and dying, there are specific feeling states people will experience in coping with divorce - denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally, acceptance.

The grief process for children of divorce is more difficult than the grief process for children who have lost a parent due to death. Divorce involves choices adults are making. With death, there is a finality that is ultimately easier to move from. According to Judith Wallerstein (Surviving the Breakup, Basic Books, 1980), "Children must grieve for the loss of an intact family and the loss of the presence of one parenting their daily life."

Denial of the divorce is the child's attempt at trying to control a situation in which they have no control. They will deny the divorce to themselves, with their parents, at school, with friends, etc. Denial serves to defend against intolerable pain until it can be tolerated bit by bit. They will tell themselves, "This can't be happening." They will tell others, "My Dad just got a new job and we will be joining him later," or "They've had this fight before and gotten back together."



Anger is understandable. Parents have broken an unwritten rule. They were supposed to provide stability of family life to enable children to move through their developmental tasks. Children are angry about the pain. They are angry about the failure of their parents to find another solution. They are angry about the changed financial status with which they must cope. They may be angry with themselves thinking they have caused the divorce. Their anger puts them in a double-bind. They recognize their parents as particularly vulnerable right now. They are afraid their anger might

push away what relationship they do have with a parent no longer living at home. Anger may come out with siblings, peers, or in self destructive behavior.

Bargaining by children is an attempt to keep parents from divorcing. Children will bargain with themselves, their parents, their teachers, friends and even God. Children may offer to be "better children." They will offer to keep their rooms cleaner, do their homework, and not to fight with their brothers or sisters

When children realize the divorce is going to happen, no matter what they do, depression occurs. Depression is a normal reaction and may be exhibited through withdrawal, drop in school grades, apathy, eating too much or too little, crying easily, carelessness about appearance, etc. Depression may last for weeks or months. Prolonged depression with no periods of lighter moods is a sign parents might want to seek professional help. Often prolonged depression means a child is feeling overly responsible for the divorce.

The child's acceptance of the divorce will be demonstrated through a renewed focus on the present and the future. The child will begin to anticipate the future and not dwell on the divorce factors. Problems will be seen as separate from the divorce, rather than caused by the divorce.



As children experience these emotions of grief, so do the parents. Parents grieve for all that the marriage meant to them, their hopes and dreams. This may happen long before the physical or legal separation occurs. There is an emotional roller-coaster associated with divorce. Parents and children will move in and out of these recognized stages. This deep emotional distress will influence daily activity. It is important that parents be aware that they may be in depression while their child is still in denial.

Listening to children is the best way to help them deal with their grief. In order to do this, parents must deal with their own grief by building and utilizing support networks.

## The Co-Parental Divorce

Divorce involving children requires adults to go through a very different process than couples who divorce without children. While a marriage can end, a family does not. The role of parent is lifelong. What an individual brings to that role varies depending on individual strengths, personal childhood experiences with parents, motivations, personal needs and values. Parents who divorce must add to that their ability, willingness and skill to re-negotiate their relationship as a co-parent with their former spouse. The co-parental divorce is a process. It evolves as former spouses separate ways they used to relate as husband and wife from their mutual relationship as parents. This usually demands a restructure in ways and levels of communication.



How cooperative parents are able to be after divorce is one of the major variables in how well children adjust to divorce. There are immediate decisions parents must make in regard to custody, visitation, and child support. There are also the on-going decisions for all parents rearing children, such as when and how to set limits, schooling, extracurricular activities, religious training, health care, summer activities, vacations, etc.

Co-parents must come to terms with sharing both time and responsibilities. The history of prior parental sharing of time and responsibilities will be important to review in considering initial plans. Various other factors must be considered - age of child, change in attachment due to stage of development, siblings, proximity of residences, and realities of finances.

Co-parenting can become problematic on two ends of a continuum. On one end, there is the inability to let go of the marital relationship by using parental issues to maintain a level of conflict. The tasks of making decisions in the best interest of children and sharing information about kids can get mired down in rigidity and bitterness. On the other end, if former spouses blur their relationship as parents back into husband and wife roles, children's natural desires for reconciliation get stirred up. This can result in a child reliving the pain of divorce when parents ultimately go in an opposite direction.

The vast majority of parents come to some co-parental arrangements before coming to court. There are many resources divorcing couples can use to help them process their decisions if they become stuck. Counselors/therapists with specific training in family treatment or trained mediators with backgrounds in both legal issues and child development can be very helpful in working through impasses.

Issues in restructuring relations as co-parents are best resolved with the recognition there will be no clear winner or loser. Minimizing losses for children in the most appropriate objective. One major decision for co-parents is deciding on custody.

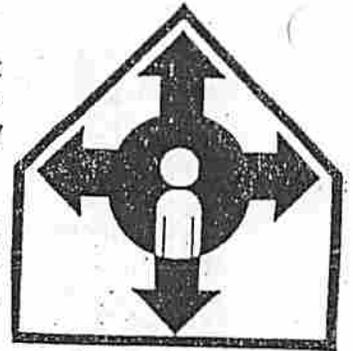
## CUSTODY

Historically, resolving custody has been a reflection of a larger society's assumptions about the role of parents. Families function today very differently than earlier generations, prompting a need to re-look at such assumptions.

There are a variety of custody arrangements today that offer options to the dilemmas and dissatisfaction felt by custodial and non-custodial parents alike. The custodial parent is faced with the difficult task of accepting the challenge of "single-parenting." Role overload is at the center of that difficulty. Single parents are faced with the job of doing everything now instead of dividing the load. They have to be both nurturer and disciplinarian. Many times, a previous homemaker parent must move into the work force to make ends meet; a parent previously "the breadwinner" may have to perform all the home maintenance and childcare functions. There never seems to be enough time, whatever the case. The idea of quality time with the child can be lost.

Single parents may be further frustrated by assuming that the non-custodial parent is "free as a bird." The custodial parent may begin to resent all the time that the other seems to have to develop new friends and activities. The custodial parent may feel "stuck," or limited.

The non-custodial parent, on the other hand, is faced with the feeling of being an "outsider." Non-custodial parents wonder how they can be a constructive influence in their child's life with the lack of daily interaction and continuity. Added depression is roused by simply missing the child.



For the non-custodial parent, this may be the first time he or she has ever lived alone. Living alone adds to the loneliness and depression caused by the separation from one's children. If the non-custodial parent does take advantage of new freedom, guilt often accompanies the pleasure: they feel they should be with their children, not having this good time.

The biggest impulse non-custodial parents often feel is throwing in the towel. They ask themselves - "why even try to be involve with the kids! It probably won't make any difference." "They will be better off, or less conflicted if I'm out of the picture." The fact is, children need both parents. The most important issue in determining custody arrangements is what serves the needs of a child best. Often, that issue comes in for consideration later when it should be the starting point. Best interest of the child often changes over time due to changing developmental needs. Children who express the greatest satisfaction with post divorce arrangements are those with frequent and free access to both their parents, regardless of formal decisions on paper.

Regardless of formal arrangements, the need for on-going communication about children is critical for parents to feel fully involved in the lives of their children. To the extent parents are able to continue sharing such information and share in making the on-going decisions about children, they will feel satisfaction as a co-parent.

Divorcing parents do not usually find that communicating with their former spouse about the children is comfortable in the beginning. It is not easy to separate out their feelings about the divorce from the need to communicate about kids. It often involves a process of learning to move from the very intimate level of communication in marriage to a more distant or "business like" communication which involves: 1) a cooperative attitude; 2) establishing an agenda and sticking to it; 3) applying a good problem solving skills; and 4) avoiding sidetracks and heightening emotions that would be counter-productive.

## The Legal Divorce

The legal divorce is the breaking of the marriage contract in the court. The division of property, child support and custody are usually settled outside of court. Lawyers competent in family law will be helpful in this process.

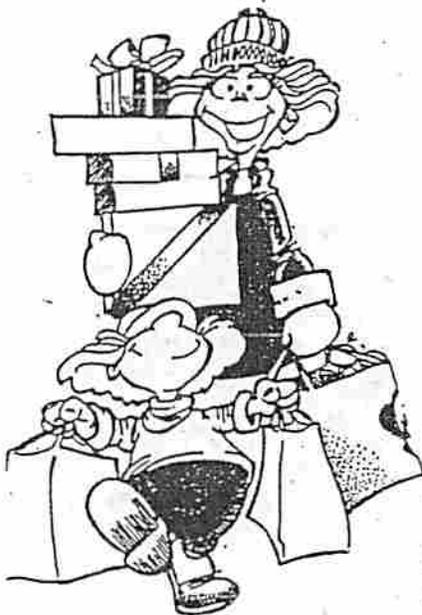
Custody battles should be avoided if possible. The custody battle usually causes great pain for all involved. Children will feel pulled between both parents. Parents will usually come out of the fight with even greater anger with each other. This anger will make later cooperation difficult. Only use a custody fight if you believe there is no possible way to negotiate an agreement that will benefit your child.

## The Economic Divorce

Parents have gone into debt by buying things for their children in order to try to make up for other losses the child has had in the divorce. Children must be told plainly that there is not as much money available as there was before the divorce. Budgets should be realistic, given the new economic problems related to the divorce. Children will adapt to the family's new economic situation.

Parents again will need to communicate and cooperate with each other. Economics is certainly an arena where the divorce process can easily become adversarial -- energies turn to who's going to win and who's going to lose. Money can become a symbolic battlefield. Lost in this shuffle is the awareness that the ultimate loser may be the children.

Child support is for children. Its purpose is to maintain a standard of living to minimize the additional social and emotional adjustments on children. Though most parents try to avoid burdening children with child support problems, children are acutely sensitive. They will pick up on the anxiety a parent might feel who is living on the edge financially. They will struggle with their reactions when there is a marked discrepancy in lifestyle of one parent compared to the other.



Often both parents experience a drop in their standard of living because the same amount of money that supported one household must now support two. Aside from the expense of legal fees, there are frequently higher medical costs as the stress of divorce increases vulnerabilities to illness in both children and adults. Childcare may be needed - either day care for the young child or after-school care for an older child.

The cost of raising kids will vary depending on the age and standard of living, but an average has been suggested at close to \$6,000 a year (\$500 per month) per child. This would include shelter, food, clothes, medical and other needs. This would not include putting away savings for college or other special expenses.

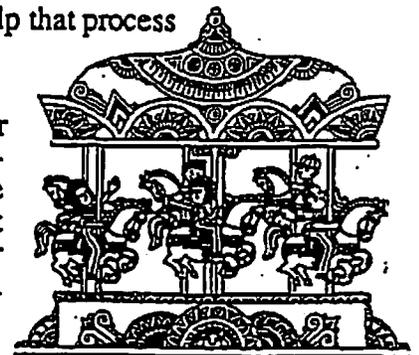
The anxiety that leads to anger when child support is late or doesn't arrive at all may certainly tempt a parent to tie visitation into compliance. Unfortunately this strategy usually backfires by pushing the delinquent parent even further away from their responsibilities. Parents who continue being actively involved in their child's life are much more likely to stay on track with financial support.

Resolving financial support issues is totally parental responsibility. Children should never be used as pawns or message carriers to resolve support issues. There are more productive, effective, and, legal means to resolve support issues.

## The Community Divorce

A major determiner in post divorce adjustment for adults is the viability of their support system. Divorcing families certainly do not receive the kind of support families get who experience a death. A natural sense of isolation is heightened by the frequent awkwardness of friends who "don't know what to say," are "afraid of taking sides," or "worried divorce is a contagious condition." There is also a normal tendency for people to socialize with others "in the same boat." Married couples tend to socialize with other married couples. Once they have children, they tend to seek out other couples with children. Therefore, divorced adults are also going to experience a need to find a support group that can understand or "relate to" their experience. Older children, in particular, may begin seeking out other peers who have experienced divorce in their families. Parents can advocate in schools to help that process for their children.

Unfortunately, our society does not have the rituals to cope with or recognize divorce as we do for other points in the family life cycle - marriage, childbirth, death, etc. The divorce experience demands, in the absence of such formal recognition, families adjust to a very different lifestyle. Learning to be single again means initiating contacts with former friends, sifting through the initial awkwardness, and finding new social groups to become part of and "again feel connected."



Due to the isolation that families can experience, they may turn inward to meet social needs. Ultimately, this puts a lot of pressure on children to perform an inappropriate supportive role for their parents. Meeting adult needs in this sense interferes with the tasks of childhood. It can also create a closed system that is hard for new people to enter.

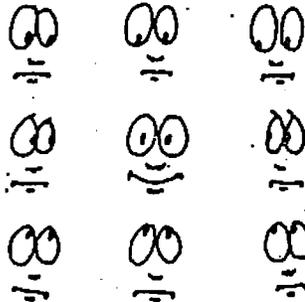
Frequently, divorcing adults turn to their family of origin for support. Children in this process become more connected with their extended families -- grandparents, aunts and uncles -- than they may have been prior to the divorce. More time may be spent with extended family during holidays. Unfortunately, in today's mobile society, people no longer necessarily live in close proximity to their family of origin, so help with on-going needs for children is not always feasible.

Parents will need to guard against the natural tendency of the extended family to "take their side" and, in doing so, disparage the other parent in front of the children. It will be the role of parents to educate the extended family on the need for children to maintain the best possible relationship with both their parents.

## The Psychic Divorce

Psychic divorce is the mental readjustment when people move from being married to being single. Even if an individual wants the divorce and is comfortable with it, there is some loss of identity. A piece of themselves usually seems to be missing. For many people, divorcing is the first time that they must stand on their own. At this time, parents, family and friends may attempt to fill what is missing. This may be smothering to the individual as people become overly protective of the newly divorced person.

Newly divorced individuals should take this time to take care of themselves -- to ask for help when they need it, but to also develop their hard won autonomy. Individuals should pursue interests that make them feel better about themselves.



As parents make the adjustments to divorce, they model adjustment for their children. Children accept the divorce and move on much faster if their parents are able to do the same.

## HOW PARENTS CAN HELP THEMSELVES

Parents face a number of problems when they divorce. Divorce brings them into new situations for which they may not have solutions. Some problems and how to handle them include...

**BEING ON ONE'S OWN** - After years of marriage and togetherness, loneliness may set in. Activities that brought enjoyment may no longer be interesting. Parents may feel isolated. It helps to establish new patterns that make one feel OK.



### WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?

- Visit friends and family often, talk to them on the phone, do things with them.
- Get involved in a support group to talk about the problems and solutions or go to counseling.
- Expect that there will be times when nothing seems to be going right, but remember that things usually get better.
- Develop new interests or hobbies - take classes, do volunteer work, join organizations, exercise.
- Make new friends.

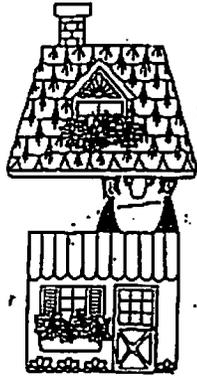
**HAVING LESS TIME FOR THE CHILDREN** - During separation and divorce, parents are trying to cope with changed and increased responsibilities and being on their own. This is also a time when the children need more affection and attention. There is too little of the parents to go around.



### WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?

- Ask family and friends for assistance.
- Be sure that each child has special attention and time. Find an activity that both parent and child can enjoy.
- Leave or send notes of love and appreciation to the children.
- Ask friends and neighbors to help with child care or exchange child care with them.
- Go for counseling or join a support group.
- Use lists to organize activities.

**TAKING CARE OF THE HOME** - Whether the children live with a parent most of the time or a smaller part of the time, being a single parent is a challenge. The demands of the job and meeting the needs of the children are a burden for one adult. Home chores may seem like the last straw.



### WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?

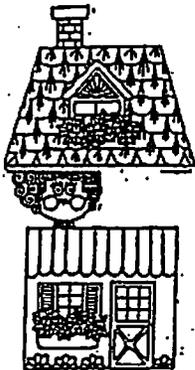
- Let some things go or change regular routines to adjust to the demands.
- Divide the chores and let the children be responsible for taking care of possessions and their own rooms.
- Look into the possibility of using a cleaning service to handle some of the chores.
- Allow the children to contribute to family problem solving.

**HANDLING MONEY PROBLEMS** - After the divorce, two separate homes must be maintained. Where previously there may have been two incomes, now there is one. It is hard to make ends meet.

### WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?

- Look for free or inexpensive activities and entertainment.
- Make a budget and stick to it.
- Get financial counseling if necessary.
- Before starting a second family, remember your obligations to your first family.
- Find out about assistance programs - food stamps, medicaid.

**BALANCING PERSONAL TIME AND CHILDREN'S NEEDS** - At some point, parents may want to begin to socialize and meet new people. It makes life more enjoyable and makes it easier to handle problems. Children may feel left out, confused, or angry.



### WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?

- Let children know that they are loved and that parents as well as children need time to do things they enjoy.
- Do not expose children to casual relationships with members of the opposite sex. If a serious relationship develops, introduce the person slowly into the children's lives.
- Include the children once in awhile in a social activity that everyone can enjoy.

# HOW CHILDREN OF DIVORCE FEEL

## TELLING CHILDREN ABOUT DIVORCE

Prior to announcing the divorce to children, parents need time to think through what their children need to hear, what will worry them the most, and what they do not need to hear!

While not always possible, whenever parents can share together telling children about divorce, several things are apparent:

- \* Children move through denial quicker.
- \* Parents are already modeling their ability to still cooperate as parents.
- \* There tends to be less focus on a "bad guy," less as confidantes and allies.

Some of the things children need to hear are:

1. Though a marriage has ended - the family will continue, including relationships with extended family.
2. While adult feelings for one another can change, the special connection between parent and child goes on forever.
3. Parents will continue taking care of their children and provide for them.
4. Children had no part in the change of feelings between the adults. They in no way caused that change and though they may wish they had the power to change the decision their parents have made, they do not have it.
5. The decision to divorce was not a whim, but a carefully thought-out direction after a lot of effort went into trying to make the marriage work.
6. Parents regret the hurt this decision has caused for their children.
7. Though the divorce will bring lots of change in time spent with parents, other areas in the life of the child will continue - same school, house, friends, or whatever parents can manage that will remain the same.
8. Current routines that will continue. (This is particularly necessary for young children).
9. Parents understand children will have a lot of concerns and certainly a lot of feelings about the divorce and parents are available to listen. Invite children at the moment to share what worries them the most, anything they didn't understand, etc.

When telling a child about a parent who has "dropped out" of their lives, who does not keep commitments to visit, does not phone, or write, or remember birthdays:

It is important for the parent who is left with sole parenting to keep in mind children can and do cope with divorce when they have at least one parent who is reliable, loving, caring and supportive. Rather than focus on the absent parent, keep the focus on yourself. "You can count on me." "I will always keep my promises to you." Remember that putting down the other parent, though tempting, is ultimately harmful to the child. Focus on what you have control of, not what you cannot change, though it pulls at your heart strings. Find books to read with young children and books to give older children to read that include such family situations. You can help your child appreciate that the absent parent problem is not a reflection of how lovable they are or their importance.

Divorce is painful for children. The effects of divorce vary with children's ages and depend on the circumstances surrounding the divorce. While every child is different and may react in different ways to divorce, there are some common reactions by age group that parents may see.

**YOUNG CHILDREN**      Preschool children live in a small world mostly made up of parents and family. They have not had many experiences. They react to what is happening in an emotional way and cannot understand the divorce on an intellectual level. Divorce is confusing and preschool children may be afraid that they will be abandoned or have nowhere to live. They cry, cling, or become demanding. They may blame themselves for the divorce and feel guilty.

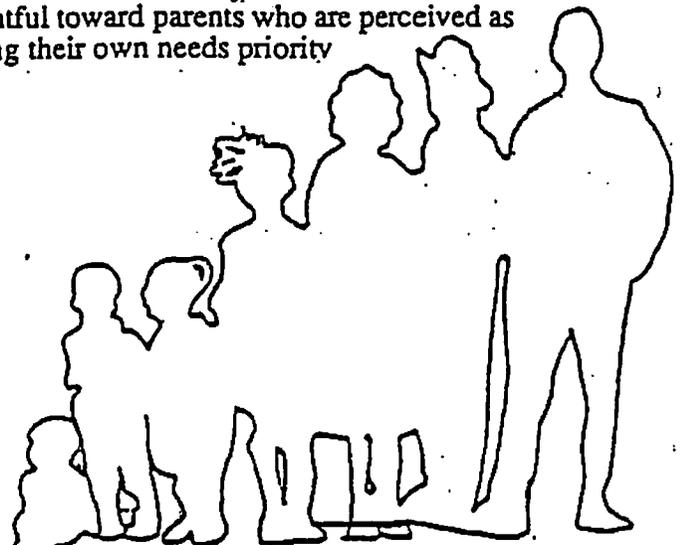
**ELEMENTARY AGE CHILDREN**      Children ages 5-12 are expanding their world to include peers and school rather than just family.

They react to what is happening by thinking about it and questioning. They worry about many things and believe in living by rules and that life is fair. Children in this age group deeply feel the loss of the family when divorce happens. Loyalty conflicts are common. Children may respond by feeling abandoned and insecure. Because of the loss of one parent, they fear that something will happen to the parent with whom they live with most of the time. Problems at school and with friends may surface. Younger children in this age group often feel very sad at the breakup of the family while older children may have very deep anger.

**YOUNG TEENAGERS**      Young teenagers are in a stage where they are going through rapid physical, social and emotional growth. Often, they are confused, moody and feel insecure. At times they may act like a little child by clinging or being demanding to parents. Other times, they reject parents and attach to friends. When parents divorce, early adolescents have more stress, which may result in their feeling rejected and ashamed or angry at their parents to camouflage their sense of vulnerability. Problems with sleeping, health, school or friends may arise. When parents vie for their allegiance, loyalty conflicts result in guilt, depression and despair.

**OLDER TEENAGERS**      This stage may be stormiest for the parent and child relationships.

Older teenagers are trying on different roles and in the process of establishing their identities. Divorce may make teenagers feel hurried to achieve independence when they aren't ready, and they become overwhelmed by unsolvable problems and feelings of incompetence. Teenagers may test their parents' concern for them. This age group may become preoccupied with the survival of relationships and mourn the loss of the family of their childhood. They feel embarrassed and resentful toward parents who are perceived as giving their own needs priority



The following chart presents common reactions of children in divorce in broad terms. The dotted lines mean that some reactions may overlap age groups. Research is just beginning to detach long range effects of divorce.

AGE GROUP	COMMON REACTION
BABIES AND TODDLERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Trouble sleeping</li> <li>Afraid to leave parent; clinging</li> <li>Crankiness</li> <li>Crying</li> <li>Slowing down in learning new skills.</li> </ul>
CHILDREN, AGES 3 - 5 YEARS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Blames self for divorce and feels guilty</li> <li>Confusion</li> <li>Fear of abandonment</li> <li>Aggression, temper tantrums</li> <li>Return to security items</li> <li>Lapses in toilet training</li> <li>Tries to convince self all is OK</li> <li>Emotionally needy</li> </ul>
CHILDREN, AGES 6 - 8 YEARS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sadness</li> <li>Crying and sobbing</li> <li>Feels abandoned and rejected</li> <li>Loyalty conflicts</li> <li>Sense of helplessness</li> <li>Hopes parents reconcile</li> <li>Anger</li> </ul>
CHILDREN, AGES 9 - 12 YEARS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Deep anger</li> <li>Physical complaints</li> <li>Sense of loss</li> <li>Shame</li> <li>Resentment</li> <li>Fear of loneliness</li> <li>Divided loyalty - anger toward the parent they blame for the divorce</li> </ul>
TEENAGERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Feelings of betrayal</li> <li>Anger</li> <li>Embarrassment</li> <li>Resentment</li> <li>Difficulty in concentrating</li> <li>Chronic fatigue</li> <li>May feel hurried to achieve independence</li> <li>May be overly dependent</li> <li>May test parents' concern for them</li> <li>May align with one parent</li> <li>Worry about survival of relationships and own future marriage</li> </ul>

## HOW PARENTS CAN HELP THEIR CHILDREN

Divorce often results in children feeling overwhelmed by the losses and changes they are experiencing. It takes time to adjust, and the time needed varies from child to child. Parents can help their children cope with divorce.

### CHILDREN NEED PREDICTABILITY



- Children who can maintain regular routines are less likely to be overwhelmed by the changes divorce brings. Parents should do their best to build and maintain healthy and smooth environments.
- Children need frequent and regular contacts with both parents.
- Children need continued contact with friends and relatives of both parents.
- Children need personal space to call their own, even if it is just a corner.
- Parents should exercise caution when introducing new boyfriends or girlfriends to children. Children often feel confused about their sense of loyalty, and parents' casual relationships may contribute to children's sense of insecurity and instability.

### CHILDREN NEED RELATIONSHIPS WITH BOTH PARENTS



- A parent needs to stress the good points about the other parent and avoid name calling, saying bad things, or blaming the other parent for problems.
- A parent should keep family photos available, including photos of the other parent.
- A parent should allow children to express their love for the other parent and talk about their experiences with the other parent.
- If children complain about one parent, the other parent should encourage children to take the complaint to the person responsible rather than agree with the children. A parent has no control over the other parent.
- A parent should encourage the other parent's involvement in the children's school or other activities and advise of parent/teacher conferences, provide report cards and give other information pertaining to the welfare of the children.

- A parent should assist children to buy cards and gifts for the other parent.
- Parents should telephone, write, make tapes and send cards if they are not able to see their children regularly.

## CHILDREN SHOULD BE KEPT OUT OF THE MIDDLE



- Parents should talk directly to each other about child-related information parents need to discuss. If talking is not possible, communicate in writing. Children should not be used as messengers.
- A parent should not ask children what goes on in the other parent's home. This is a violation of children's trust.
- Parents should not argue in front of the children. Parents should manage their feelings, and if they cannot, they should end the conversation until they are able to do so.
- Parents should never expect or encourage their children to take sides.
- If children tell a parent that the other parent lets them stay up late or lets them eat sweets for dinner, a parent should tell children that they must follow the rules of the household and that the other parent cannot be told what to do in his/her home.



- A parent should not withhold the children from the other parent or refuse to pay child support. Children should not be used as weapons to get back at the other parent.
- Parents should be on time for the exchange of children. This sets a good example for children and does not disrupt children's routines.
- Parents should use common courtesy and be civil and businesslike in their dealings with each other.
- Parents should not jump to conclusions before getting all the information.
- A parent should not compare children unfavorably with the other parent.
- A parent should not expect children to take the place of the absent parent or depend on the children for emotional support. Children need to be children.



- Parents should follow up agreements, in writing, about vacation dates, trips to the doctor or dentist, and changes in time sharing to avoid confusion and double scheduling.
- Parents should negotiate with one another about changes in time sharing or responsibilities for the children that each parent will assume. Negotiation requires giving and taking by both parents.
- Parents should recognize that as children grow and develop, time sharing and parents' responsibilities may have to change to meet the changing needs of the children.

### COMMUNICATION IS IMPORTANT



- Parents should tell children about the divorce together if possible.
- Children need to know, sometimes over and over, how they will be affected by the divorce, where they will go to school, where they will live, when they will see the other parent, friends and relatives, and who will take care of them should something happen to the parent with whom they live most of the time.
- Children need reassurance that they are not to blame for the divorce.
- Parents should answer children's questions honestly while avoiding unnecessary details.
- Parents should discuss divorce-related issues in terms the children can understand. It is helpful to avoid terms such as "custody" and "visitation."
- Parents should encourage children to talk about the divorce and their feelings and discuss problems openly. Parents should be an emotional support for their children but not rely on children to be their emotional support.
- Parents need to accept children's mood swings and emotional outbursts and not take them personally. Counseling or support groups may help children resolve their feelings and guide parents in handling children's negative behavior.
- Children should be helped to accept the reality of the divorce and not be given false hopes of reunion.
- Parents should not allow their past conflicts to interfere with present decisions regarding children.



Parents should approach single parenting with a positive attitude and speak encouragingly about the future. Children need to know that a parent is strong and capable of taking care of them.

Parents should express their love and commitment to the children to help them feel secure.

Children's adjustment to divorce depends on how parents handle the divorce. Parents are role models for children and need to set a good example for them. Children imitate the behaviors and attitudes of their parents.

When parents are able to lay aside their anger and resentment toward the other parent and handle the divorce in a mature and positive way, children benefit and are assisted in making a healthy adjustment to divorce. The greatest gift divorcing parents can give their children is to allow them to have a loving, satisfying relationship with both parents and not expose them to continued conflict and hostility.

## TIME SHARING

Though divorce has ended a marriage, parenting remains. Children will begin to adjust and heal more readily after the trauma of divorce if cooperative parenting is established.

After divorce, one parent usually is responsible for the primary care and maintenance of the children. The other parent has parenting time with the children, time which is either defined by an order of the court or is agreed upon by both parents.

At first, time sharing for child raising may seem to complicate an already stressful situation. Divorced parents may find that their roles and expectations are undefined and cloudy. It takes time, effort, and planning on the part of parents to be able to provide a safe environment that helps children recover from the divorce and feel good about themselves. Following are some guidelines and suggestions to facilitate parenting and time sharing:

**BEING CONSISTENT** It is crucial that parents are regular and consistent about time sharing. Children need to know how they will be involved time sharing and that they will be picked up and returned at scheduled times. If an emergency arises that requires a change in time sharing or if parenting time will not be exercised, each parent has the responsibility of notifying the other parent as far in advance as possible.

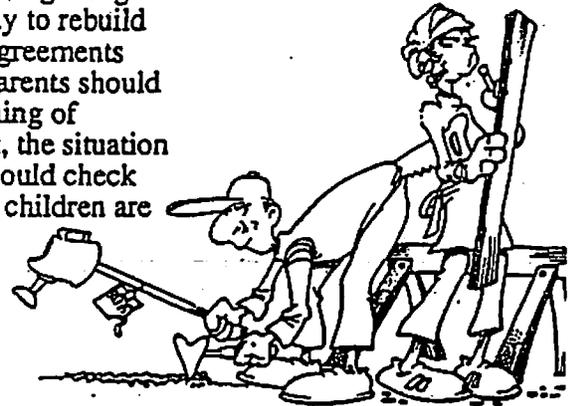
The children should be supplied with adequate clothing for the parenting time, and the clothing is to be returned at the end of parenting time. If the children are on medication, the medication, the dosage, and the times the medication is to be taken should be made available to the parent. Any information which pertains to the welfare of the children should be shared by parents.

## GOING BETWEEN HOUSEHOLDS

Children may complain, become withdrawn, or act out when it is time to go between the parents' homes. A parent may believe that something negative is happening in the other parents' home because of the children's behavior. The behavior is usually normal and not necessarily an indication that anything is wrong. Children may be involved in an activity that they don't want to interrupt. Children miss the parent they are not with and go through an adjustment when getting ready to leave each parent's home.

## REBUILDING TRUST

It is essential that divorced parents make efforts to rebuild trust between themselves. Having a degree of trust helps reduce conflicts. One way to rebuild trust is to honor agreements made between parents. Broken agreements result in anger, disappointment, resentment and retaliation. Parents should tell each other the truth. If plans need to be changed or something of concern happens during the time the children are with a parent, the situation should be discussed calmly with the other parent. A parent should check out children's stories about the other parent and recognize that children are not always accurate in their portrayal of events.



## SHARING AND PARTICIPATING IN ACTIVITIES

Because of the newness of the divorce and the change in roles, it is helpful to outline a specific list of activities for the parenting time. Choose activities that are appropriate to children's ages and interests. Reading books together, picnics, walks, biking, cooking, games, and trips to parks, the zoo, museums, and the library are some activities. Parents may have skills to pass along to their children. Working on the car, computer, or sewing machine assists children to grow in skills and independence and share in an activity that the parent enjoys.

A parent's role does not necessarily begin and end with scheduled parenting time. The parent also may participate in parent/teacher conferences, attend school functions, help children with homework, or assist in taking the children to medical appointments and their social or sports activities.

Participating and sharing in activities allows parents to remain involved with their children. However, both parents need to establish "normal" routines with chores, bedtimes, rules and standards for behavior, and regular meals to help children feel secure and stable.

## SOLVING PROBLEMS

Parents need to communicate about parenting. When problems arise, the first impulse may be to blame the other parent. Anger and blaming are barriers that interfere with communication. Communication requires special skills and compromise. When there is a problem, parents need a plan.

### First, ask yourself:

Is this a child-related problem? Bringing up problems that have to do with marriage or divorce issues of the parents is not part of the business of parenting.

Does this problem have to do with the children's health, education, or time sharing?

Divorced parents may have to limit discussions to these three topics.

Is a change in the time sharing schedule convenient for me only or does it accommodate the other parent or the children?

Can the problem wait or does it need to be discussed as soon as possible?

Make a list of the issues to be discussed and your proposals. If possible, let it sit for a few days to see if you have any changes or need more information before arranging a meeting.

### When parents meet for problem solving:

Arrange a time and place that is convenient for both parents.

Limit discussion time to 30 minutes. When discussion time gets long, emotions may get out of hand.

Only cover a few issues in one session. Start with the easy problems and move on to the more difficult.

Be specific about what you mean. Set ground rules that there will be no personal attacks or name calling.

If you disagree, look for ways that each parent can give a little.

Write down any agreements you make and make sure that each of you has a copy. Once a decision is made, put it away and don't try to re-think it.

## DIVORCE GAMES - NOBODY WINS

Divorce is painful, and people who are hurting often act in ways that hurt other people. They may play "divorce games" in which they attempt to use or manipulate someone in order to gain control over their lives, but the games are not fun and they're not good for anyone involved. The games are usually not intentional - they sort of just happen unless one recognizes them and avoids them.



In the beginning of the divorce, people may actually "win" at one or two of the games. They then feel that they got something out of the mess and have some kind of control over the situation. However, divorce games eventually result in the players feeling guilty, untrustworthy, and depressed, and children are hurt. No one wins in divorce games.

## GAMES PARENTS PLAY

### I SPY



A parent sometimes asks a child a lot of questions about what is going on in the other parent's home -- questions about whether mom or dad has a boyfriend or girlfriend, if the new boyfriend/girlfriend is spending the night, if mom or dad is drinking or using drugs, if mom/dad asked questions about him or her. Sometimes the questions are to satisfy curiosity, but sometimes they are to hurt the other parent or to hurt the parent asking the questions. Sometimes the questions are to help a parent feel better about himself or herself -- that the other parent is not doing okay without the relationship.

Enlisting children to play this game complicates and confuses the relationships they have with both parents and is damaging to their emotional well-being.

### TUG OF WAR



Parents sometimes continue their conflicts after the divorce. Each side looks for support for his/her side because then parents can assure themselves that they are "right" and "okay" because the child is on their side.

Children are caught in the middle and feel as though they are being ripped apart. Children usually lose respect for both parents and themselves because children are a part of both parents.

### MESSENGER



Warring parents can't stand to talk to each other and sometimes don't want to take the chance of making the other parent angry. So they ask children to take little messages to the other parent -- "You are two weeks behind in child support; When are you going to pay?" "The house is still half mine, and you better make sure the furnace is repaired." "If I don't get Christmas this year, I won't pay child support."

Children should not be involved in parents' fights. Children need to love both parents because it makes them feel better about themselves.

## I'VE GOT YOU BABE



When parents divorce, they become overwhelmed and feel less than whole. They feel alone and miss the companionship and help with responsibilities that were a part of the marriage. They may count on children to fill the gap and look to children for emotional support or to be the "little mother" or "man of the house."

Children feel used when thrust into the role of being the parent's friend or helpmate. They often must grow up before they are ready and miss out on being a child.

## THE MONEY GAME



Parents often have a financial crunch when they become single parents. They sometimes let children know how worried they are when bills come due or are overdue. They may blame the other parent for their money problems.

This behavior scares children and makes them feel insecure. They may become preoccupied with thoughts about how they can bring money into the home or they may think that if they aren't there, the parent will be able to cope more easily.

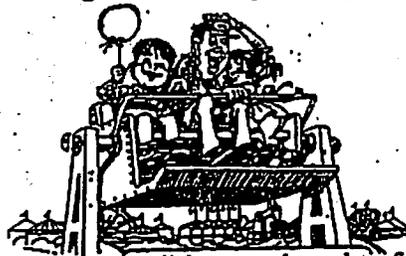
## I'M STARTING OVER



Sometimes, divorce makes parents feel that they are starting over and that they are young again. They may adopt clothing or hair styles of teenagers. They may stay out late or not come home until morning.

Children find it embarrassing and confusing when parents act like "one of the kids."

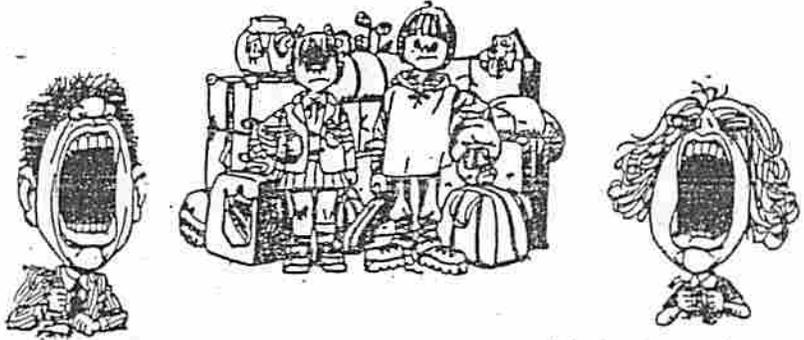
## I OWE MY KID



Parents know that divorce hurts children, and tend to feel guilty. Some try to make it up to the children by letting them off the hook with chores and responsibilities or by buying the children wonderful presents, sometimes going without things themselves to do it.

Children know when parents are trying to buy their love. It makes them feel uncomfortable. Children need the consistency of still having to do their regularly assigned chores, and they need love and attention.

## OVER MY DEAD BODY



Sometimes parents play custody and visitation games. They try to get even with the other parent for some hurt that occurred in the marriage or caused the divorce. They try to keep the children from the other parent or they try to gain custody or break the other parent financially through court battles. Some try to show that they are the better parent or to intimidate the other parent to gain something they want.

Children feel at fault in these games; if they weren't around they wouldn't be a vehicle for the parents to continue to fight. They believe that their own feelings don't matter because the parents are so consumed with fighting the war.

## NAME CALLING



A parent sometimes calls the other parent names or says nasty things about the other parent within the hearing of the children. The parent is hurt or angry and may even believe that the children should know the "truth" about the other parent.

Children don't feel good about themselves when part of themselves comes from the "no good" parent. Children need to learn for themselves the strengths and shortfalls of each parent. They want and need a good relationship with both parents.

## GUIDED MISSILE



A parent may try to use children as a weapon to change the other parent's behavior or to try to get something from the other parent. The parent may refuse to pay child support because he/she believes the other parent is using it for entertainment or new clothes. A parent may refuse visitation because a new girlfriend/boyfriend is in the life of the other parent and believe that parent is now immoral or not giving enough time to the children.

This behavior is unfair to children. Children should not be used as a pawn for one parent to retaliate against the other.

## GAMES CHILDREN PLAY

### I'LL BE ON YOUR SIDE IF YOU GIVE ME WHAT I WANT

Children sometimes tell a parent what the other parent has given them or along the places the other parent has taken them to try to gain similar advantages from that parent. Children sometimes tell a parent the grievances they have about the other parent to make that parent play into their hands.

Parents need to realize that children are not always accurate reporters and that they do try to manipulate situations to their advantage.



### BUT MOM (OR DAD) SAID YES

This game also is played by children to get their own way at the expense of one of the parents. Children know the kinds of events or activities that one parent may allow but not the other. This game particularly works well if the parent who allows the activity is outside the home. The children enlist that parent's support and if the other parent says no, children drop the bombshell-- "but dad/mom said it would be OK." This also works when parents have different rules or responsibilities for the children.

If possible, parents of divorce should continue to try to present a united front to children and try to determine the position the other parent may take. Children need to know that while each parent may have different rules, the rules of the household in which they are residing when an issue arises should be followed.

### BLACKMAIL



Children may try to manipulate a parent when they are feeling threatened by change or want their own way. Children may tell a parent they won't visit or they will go and live with the other parent if the parent has a new girlfriend/boyfriend, is going to remarry, tells the children they can't do something, or disciplines the children.

If this game is not brought to a halt, children gain power over the parent. Children need to understand that there are rules and consequences for broken rules and that parents have to get on with their lives too.

## I'LL GET EVEN WITH YOU

Children rarely understand the motivation and consequences for this game as they do for the other divorce games they play. Children sometimes display hurt and anger by acting differently from ways they behaved before. Some children may be withdrawn or act violently toward themselves or others. Sometimes the child at home may be different from the at-school child.

Parents who are understanding and have good communication with children may be able to address the problems and help children resolve the feeling of hurt and anger. Some children may need professional help and should be involved in counseling.

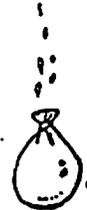
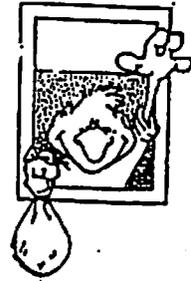
## CONCLUSION

When children are asked what they want to see happen after divorce, they tend to answer that they would like their parents back together again. When parents are asked the same question, most respond that they want nothing to do with their former spouse.

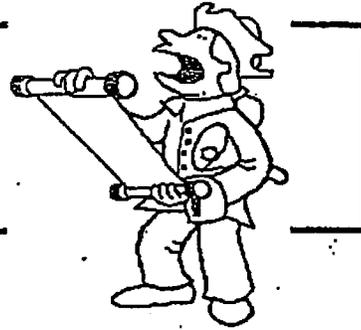
The adjustments required in post-divorce relationships are never easy, for divorce is one of life's most stressful events for everyone involved. Children are devastated by divorce and feel powerless. Typically, they experience tremendous loss and pain. They have been dependent on both parents, and the props have been knocked out from under them. They feel disbelief that the family will no longer exist as they have known it. Many are anxious, angry, sad, depressed, and confused about what is happening. They feel abandoned, and they suffer a drop in self-esteem.

Just when children need them most, many newly-divorced parents need time for themselves to regain a sense of balance and personal well-being. If grieving parents lose their ability to consider their children's needs, everyone suffers. It is hard enough to raise children when parents are together and getting along well; it is much more difficult when divorced parents are having problems talking with each other.

Children need relationships with both parents after divorce, and parents must do what they can to promote those relationships. Children desperately need parental cooperation. Parents can learn to get along after divorce and share responsibilities for their children even if they did not get along as husband and wife. Parents or children who have great difficulty coping with divorce should seek professional help. Hopefully, the information in this booklet will serve as a guide to raising secure and healthy children after divorce,



## CHILDREN'S BILL OF RIGHTS



### CHILDREN HAVE:

1. the right to be treated as important human beings, with unique feelings, ideas and desires, and not as a source of argument between parents.
2. the right to a continuing relationship with both parents and the freedom to receive love from and express love for both.
3. the right to express love and affection for each parent without having to stifle that love because of fear of disapproval by the other parent.
4. the right to know that their parents' decision to divorce is not their responsibility and that they will live with one parent and visit the other.
5. the right to continuing care and guidance from both parents.
6. the right to honest answers to questions about the changing family relationships.
7. the right to know and appreciate what is good in each parent without one degrading the other.
8. the right to have a relaxed, secure relationship with both parents without being placed in a position to manipulate one parent against the other.
9. the right to have the custodial parent not undermine visitation by suggesting tempting alternatives or by threatening to withhold visitation as a punishment for the children's wrongdoing.
10. the right to be able to experience regular and consistent visitation and the right to know the reason for canceled visits.

## SUGGESTED READINGS

### FOR FAMILIES:

Changing Families: A Guide for Kids and Grown-Ups by David Fassier, M.D., Michele Lash, M.Ed., A.T.R., and Sally B. Ives, Ph.D. (Waterfront Books, 1988, \$14.95).

Divorce Happens to the Nicest Kids by Michael S. Prokop, M.Ed. (Alegra House Publishers, 1986, \$11.95).

The Divorce Workbook: A Guide for Kids and Families by Sally Blakslee Ives, Ph.D. (Waterfront Books, 1985, \$12.95).

Mr. Rogers Talks to Families about Divorce by Fred Rogers and Clare O'Brien. (Berkley Books, 1987, \$6.95).

On Divorce: An Open Family Book for Parents and Children Together by Sara Bonnett Stein (Walker & Co., 1979, \$4.95).

Why Are We Getting A Divorce? by Peter Mayle (Harmony Books, 1988, \$11.95).

### FOR CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS:

At Daddy's on Saturdays by Linda Walvoord Girard (Albert Whitman & Co., 1987, \$12.95). Ages 6-8.

Breaking Up by Norma Klein (Avon, 1981, \$2.50). Ages 12-16.

Daddy Doesn't Live Here Anymore by Jill Krementz (Alfred A. Knopf, 1984, \$12.95). Ages 8-16.

It's Not the End of the World by Judy Blume (Dell, 1986, \$3.25). Ages 8-14.

The Kids' Book of Divorce - By, For & About Kids by the Unit at Fayweather Street School; Eric Rofes, Editor (Vintage Books, 1982, \$3.95). Ages 11-14.

Mommy and Me by Ourselves Again by Judy Vigna (ALbert Whitman & Co., 1987, \$12.95). Ages 3-5.

## SUGGESTED READINGS continued

### FOR PARENTS:

Divorced Book for Parents by Vicki Lansky (New American Library, 1989, \$18.95).

Growing Up Divorced by Linda Francke (Faucett, 1984, \$3.95).

Growing Up with Divorce: Helping Your Child Avoid Immediate and Later Emotional Problems by Neil Kalter, Ph.D. (The Free Press, 1989, \$22.95).

Helping Children of Divorce: A Handbook for Parents and Teachers by Susan A. Diamond (Schocken Books, 1986, \$6.59).

How to Single Parent by Fitzhugh Dodson (Harper & Row, 1987, \$15.95).

The Michigan PTA Parents' Answer Book, Executive Editor Alice R. McCarthy, Ph.D. Order from Michigan PTA, 1011 N. Washington, Lansing, MI 48906. \$7.95 plus \$2.50 shipping (up to 24 books shipped for \$2.50). (517) 485-4345.

Pick Up Your Socks: A Practical Guide to Raising Responsible Children by Elizabeth Crary (Parenting Press, Inc., 1990, \$11.95).

Second Chances: Men, Women and Children, A Decade After Divorce by Judith Wallerstein and Sandra Blakeslee (Ticknor and Fields, 1989, \$19.95).

Whose Kids' is it Anyway? The Complete Social and Legal Guide for Stepparents, Stepchildren, and Stepgrandparents by Marcella M. Sabo, Ed.S., L.M.F.T., Rosana Gersham, and Geraldine Lee Waxman, J.D., F.M. (Next Step Publications, 1989, \$12.95).

Check your local library. There are many similar books for families, children and adolescents, and parents.