

“Twenty Questions Divorcing Parents Ask about Their Children”

Dear Parent:

divorce can be a time when both parents and children feel overwhelmed by the losses and changes they are experiencing. The purpose of this pamphlet is to provide information and guidelines to prevent common difficulties both during and after the divorce. Divorce ends the husband-wife relationship, not the parent relationship and parental responsibilities. When they cooperate and communicate in the challenging task of parenting during and after the divorce the children may not end up feeling divorced, too.

This pamphlet presents many common problems and concerns expressed by divorcing parents. It is intended to assist parents in developing a cooperative, nurturing environment for their children. The sooner the parents can begin to put the past behind them and work together as parents by sharing the rights and responsibilities of parenthood, the greater the possibility of setting a positive tone for the successful resolution of family problems.

The emphasis of this pamphlet is to answer pressing questions regarding family relationships during and after divorce. It is not the purpose of the pamphlet to answer legal questions. The current trend is to encourage parents to develop their own parenting plan; however, it is advisable for parents to consult an attorney to find out whether their plan is consistent with the divorce laws of their state.

1. What does working together as parents really mean?

Working together as parents mean cooperating with the other parent about raising the children, no matter how the parents feel about each other. It means working out a parenting plan that gives the children enough to be cared for by both parents and following the plan that is mutually acceptable to both parents. Working together as parents also means both parents sharing responsibilities for the children's care, respecting the other parent's rights and privacy, and developing a method of communication for discussing serious problems regarding the children. This kind of cooperative relationship can begin before the separation or soon after separation.

2. Why should parents cooperate when they don't like each other?

When parents cooperate the children have a better chance for a secure and satisfying life. It is important to cooperate, not just for the sake of the children, but for the parents' benefit as well. When they cooperate the following is possible:

- * better parent-child relationships; fewer problems for the children; more personal satisfaction for the parents and less frustration; less visitation problems; less child support problems; less going back to court; easier sharing of responsibility; more freedom from conflict; fewer health, emotional, school and social problems.

It is a myth that parents who were not able to get along as a marriage partners cannot work together as parents. They can.

3. How can parents ease the hurt for children?

Some common emotions children and parents experience in connection with separation and divorce are disbelief, anger, anxiety, confusion, guilt, helplessness, loneliness and depression. Children can best deal with these feelings when parents cooperate. What is damaging to children is the loss of ongoing relationships with each parent or witnessing continual conflict. Serious problems can

usually be prevented when parents are willing to put their children's interest before their own anger. Contrary to what many people believe, parents can work together even when they don't like each other.

Parents can ease the hurt for children by going out of their way to work together even when they feel angry-

AVOID:

- *blaming each other; arguing and fighting in front of the children; threatening to send the children to live with the other parent.

WORK TOWARD:

- *reassuring children that the divorce is not their fault; encouraging them to express their feelings such as fear and anger; giving them permission to continue to love both parent and not to take sides; reassuring them that they will be taken care of; preparing the children for the changes.

4. How can parents prepare children for the separation or divorce?

Whenever possible it is best for both parents to call a family meeting to prepare the children for the separation or divorce. Give the children a simple explanation that they can understand about the divorce, without blaming anyone. Tell the children they will be cared for by both parents even though the parents won't be living together any more. The children need to be reassured from time to time that they will continue to be cared for and loved by both parents as well as grandparents and other relatives.

5. What kinds of things are especially damaging for children?

It is damaging to children when:

- *children do not get to spend enough nurturing time with both parents;
- *parents threaten to send children away or to leave children if they do not behave;
- *parents use children to carry angry messages back and forth;
- *children are made to believe that one parent is good and the other is bad;
- *children don't feel free to love both parents and also stepparents;
- *parents do not prepare children for changes that will occur;
- *parents burden children with adult problems like finances, legal matters, etc.;
- *parents expect children to comfort them instead of seeking adult relationships;
- *parents neglect their own needs and/or the needs of the children by overwhelming themselves with the entire responsibility of raising the children, instead of encouraging to share in this responsibility.

6. What kinds of parenting plans are there?

There are parenting plans in which one parent has most of the responsibility for the care of the children, such as in sole custody plans. There are plans in which both share time and responsibility for the children more equally, such as in joint legal and joint physical custody plans. (See question regarding joint custody). The most beneficial plans are those that are discussed and accepted by both parents.

7. What kind of parenting plan is best for children?

The best plans are those based upon the changing needs of the children. Such plans encourage and promote a close, separate and ongoing relationship with each parent. In addition, plans should

encourage children to maintain contact with their relatives-especially with their grandparents. This assures that the children will receive the love they need.

8. What special needs do children have at different ages?

Pre-School-Age Children's Needs:

very young children need frequent contact with both parents. Even short periods can be reassuring for young children. They need to be held, fed, bathed, read to, cuddled, plays with and spoken to. Changes should be made as gradually as possible. Young children are very dependent and they need caring people to look after them.

School-Age-Children's Needs:

school-age children need longer periods with each parent. Sleeping over in each parent's home helps them adjust to the loss of the original family unit and helps them to feel at home with both parents. Six-to-eight-year-olds may need special reassurance that they did not cause the divorce. They need permission to love both parents and all the people in their lives who are good to them. School-age children benefit when both parents are interested and involved in their education and when both parents participate in teacher conferences and special school activities.

Adolescents' Needs:

adolescents are striving toward independence. They need: privacy; activities with other adolescents; some flexibility so they can reschedule plans with parents; freedom from overwhelming responsibility for major family decisions; continued guidance from parents about rules and standards for their behavior; parents who act like parents, not like pals; parents who do not constantly lean on them for moral support; cooperative parents who encourage them not to take sides; ongoing contact with both parents so they can experience each parent's strengths and weaknesses.

Children of all ages need to know that neither parent will abandon them and that family life with each will continue.

9. Why does a child need ongoing contact with both parents?

If children lose contact with one parent following the separation or divorce, they experience great pain and a sense of rejection, even if they do not express this outwardly. Many children find it difficult to trust and forgive a parent who left them. The hurt brought about by the loss of a parent can remain with the children throughout their lives and may keep them from being willing to love and trust others. Some children imagine the missing parent to be "perfect," instead of a human being with strengths and weaknesses. The more they are kept from seeing a parent, the more they want to be with that parent. Increasingly, courts are now favoring the parent who encourages access with the other parent. Experience shows that children tend to do best when they have ongoing contact with both parents.

10. What if a child does not want to see one parent?

It often helps if the parent gives the child a chance to express their feelings. After listening, it is important for the child to be reassured of that parent's love. Children need to be given permission to love and enjoy both parents. When a child refuses contact with one parent, family counseling is often recommended. If this problem is neglected or ignored, the child may carry the anger and hurt into adulthood and lessen his or her chances for happiness.

11. Why do some parents stop seeing the children after a divorce?

Sometimes a parent stops seeing the children because of constant hassle with the other parent. A parent may stop seeing the child for a while because each separation is very painful. The unintended result may be that children feel abandoned. Sometimes a parent stops seeing the children because he or she believes it's too confusing for the children to have to go back and forth. Parents often do not realize a child's lasting pain in losing contact with a parent. Divorce is such a painful and disorganizing experience that, unfortunately, many parents are temporarily blinded to the needs of the children at a time when they need them the most.

12. What if a parent does not pay child support?

Paying child support is an important parental responsibility. Children should not be burdened with child support problems or be made to ask for child support. Such matter should be settled between parents. When this is not possible, legal assistance should be sought. Court enforced remedies are available.

Child support should be paid regularly and promptly. As important as paying child support is, children should not be kept from seeing a parent because child support has not been paid. Money and parent-child relationships are two separate things and should be kept apart to avoid more suffering for the child.

13. How can a parent deal with a stepparent or the new person in the other parent's life?

It is natural to experience feelings of rejection, jealousy and rage when a former spouse has a new relationship. There may even be a desire to try to stop that relationship, but such attempts can only lead to more problems.

Some people find it comforting to express their fears and anxieties by talking about them with friends or a therapist. Others might find relief by writing their feelings down in a diary or by expressing them in physical or artistic activities.

In addition to the pain of losing a spouse, parents may also be afraid of losing their important place in their child's life. It is often comforting to know that parents generally can never be replaced, even when the child enjoys a good relationship with the new person.

Children should be given permission to love all the people in their lives. They need all the love they can get.

14. How can a stepparent help the children?

Stepparents should encourage the children to honor and respect both their parents and not to take sides. Stepparents can be special friends to the children. They should not try to compete, replace or be critical of the legal or biological parents. When stepparents put down the child's parent, the child feels worse about himself and less loving towards the stepparent.

15. How can parents reassure children about the future when parents are upset themselves?

Children are reassured when they realize that their parents are not divorcing them, that each parent will continue taking care of them, and that it is okay for them to love both parents.

Parents can reassure children by being honest about their feelings and letting them know it is natural to be upset at a time like this. In some way parents should help children understand that although this is very painful period, it is temporary and it will pass. It takes time for everyone in the family to heal.

16. What is joint custody?

Joint Legal Custody means that both parents are legally authorized to participate in making major decisions about their children's health, education and welfare.

Joint Physical Custody means that the children spend frequent and significant amounts of time with each parent. There are numerous joint physical custody options-not necessarily 50-50. The specific time sharing plan should be determined by the special needs of the children as they grow and needs change.

When parents do not live in the same school district, care must be taken to establish a schedule which does not interfere with the child's time in school. A suitable joint physical custody plan can work even when parents do not reside in the same city, state, or country, by alternating school and vacation periods.

A written parenting plan, mutually acceptable to both parents, should be worked out, preferably by the parents themselves. Court counseling services, private and public resources are often available to assist parents in developing such a plan.

17. Will things ever get settled so I can get on with my life?

Matters regarding the children should be kept separate from financial matter. Financial matters will eventually get settled either by agreement between parties through help of attorneys, or through decision by the court. No matter what the settlement is, the children still have a right to have two parents following the divorce. When a marriage comes to an end, there is a lot of hurt, anger and sadness, which takes time to work through. Although many people doubt that their lives will ever be whole again, people do create new lives for themselves. It takes some people longer time than others to accept the divorce, some keep trying to hang on to the marriage instead of letting go. Life can become easier when parents:

- *allow themselves to accept the divorce; are willing to meet together to develop a mutually acceptable parenting plan; share the pleasures and responsibilities of parenthood; respect the other parent's need for privacy and separate relationships; are patient with each other and themselves until things get settled; seek professional help when needed.

18. Is it hard on children going back and forth?

Children are often hurt more by infrequent contact with one parent than by the inconvenience of giving back and forth. They usually get used to living in two homes when parents cooperate and there are not continual conflicts between parents.

No matter what plan parents agree on, it is important that the plan is in writing and each parent have a copy. One copy should also be submitted to the attorneys. It may take several weeks or months to determine whether or not a particular plan is workable. Special attention should be given to the children's reaction and parents should be willing to make changes to suit the children's and parents needs. From time to time changes will be necessary. Plans should not be thought of as "cast in concrete."

19. When do families need professional help?

The following conditions may suggest the need for professional help:

- *if parents experience difficulty in communicating with one another; if there is violence between any of the family members; if there is a lack of involvement with the child by either parent;

**if either child or parent has the following problems:*

**delinquent or self-destructive behavior; frequent daydreaming or withdrawal from any relationships; school problems; depression or anxiety that just doesn't go away; alcohol or drug abuse; inability to talk about feelings; children siding with one parent against the other.*

Seeking help early can often prevent serious, lasting problems.

20. Where can parents find professional help?

Individual counseling and/or family counseling can be found by contacting:

**American Association for Marriage and Family Therapists*

1717 K Street, N.W.

Washington, D.C. 20036

**Conciliation Court or Family Court; Family Service Agencies; Mental Health agencies; Child Guidance clinics; Private mental health professionals; Family doctors; Ministers, priests or rabbis.*

Choose a counselor as you would a doctor or lawyer. You have a right to ask about credentials, training and experience in helping people with your type of problem. Do not head blindly for the yellow pages in the telephone directory, since such listings may include persons with inadequate training, or no training at all.