

Guidelines for Parents During Separation and Divorce

The following suggestions are made to help you and your children throughout the Collaborative process and beyond.

1. Before acting, think first of your children's present and future emotional and mental well-being. This may be difficult, because of your own feelings, needs, and emotions, but keep trying.
2. Maintain your composure and emotional balance as much as possible. In talking to yourself, verbally and in your thoughts, remember that a divorce is not the end of the world. Laugh when you can and try to keep a sense of humor. What your children see in your attitude is, to some measure, reflected in their attitudes.
3. Allow yourself and your children time for readjustment. Convalescence from an emotional operation such as a dissolution of marriage is essential.
4. Remember the best parts of your marriage. Share them with your children and use them constructively.
5. Assure your children that they are not to blame for the breakup and that they are not being rejected or abandoned. Children, especially young children, often mistakenly feel they have done something wrong and believe that the problems in the family are the result of their own misdeeds. Small children may feel that some action or secret wish of theirs has caused the trouble between the parents. Explain to them that there are other children whose parents have been divorced and that they are not going to lose their mom or dad.
6. Continuing anger or bitterness toward your spouse can injure your children far more than the dissolution itself. The *feelings* you show often are more important than the *words* you use.
7. Refrain from voicing criticism of the other parent. It may be difficult, but it is absolutely necessary. For a child's healthy development, it is important for the child to respect both parents.
8. Do not encourage your children to take sides. Doing so increases frustration, guilt, and resentment.
9. Ending a marriage often leads to financial pressures on both parents. When there is a financial crisis, the parent's first impulse may be to keep the children from realizing it. Often they would rather make sacrifices themselves than ask the child to do so. Parents should

carefully consider whether discussing financial matters with their children, in light of their age and maturity, is in their best interest.

10. Marriage breakdown is always hard on the children. They may not always show their stress or realize, at first, what this will mean to them. Parents should be direct in telling children what is happening and why, in a way a child can understand and digest. This will vary with the circumstances and with each child's age and level of understanding. The worst course is to try to hush things up and make a child feel he/she must not talk or even think about what he/she sees is going on. Unpleasant happenings need an explanation. This explanation should be brief, prompt, direct, honest, and loving.
11. The guilt parents may feel about the marriage breakdown may interfere in their disciplining the children. Children need consistent control, guidance, and boundaries. They also need and want to know quite clearly what is expected of them. Parents must be ready to say "no" when necessary.
12. Admit that you are only human. You will not be able to be the perfect parent (no one ever can be – in good or bad times). When you make a mistake, acknowledge it and resolve to attempt to improve day by day.
13. Understand the importance of shielding the children from the negative impact of parental conflict. If either parent becomes uncomfortable during a face-to-face or telephone discussion, rather than letting the discussion escalate into an argument, that parent should state his or her discomfort and have permission to end the discussion without further explanation. Both parents should understand that this may include hanging up the phone if it is a telephone discussion. The parent terminating the discussion should re-contact the other parent within forty-eight hours to continue the discussion.
14. Read and reread these basic suggestions. Add to them by writing down your own constructive, positive approaches to handling your new way of living. Discuss, when practical, your thoughts and feelings with other people you trust and feel comfortable with, and benefit by sharing their positive attitudes.

Bear in mind that while divorce is one of the greatest emotional stresses we can experience in our lifetimes, it also provides the greatest opportunity for those who are present to the experience to have transformational breakthroughs in personal growth.

Adapted from Webb and Ousky, *The Collaborative Way to Divorce*.