

GUIDELINES FOR PARENTS DURING SEPARATION OR DIVORCE

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

1. Think first of your children's present and future emotional and mental well-being before acting. This may be difficult because of your own feelings, needs and emotions – but try, try, try.
2. Maintain your own composure and good emotional balance as much as possible in talking to yourself, verbally and in your thoughts. Remember, it 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 in some measure reflected in their own attitudes and emotions.
3. Allow yourself and your children time for readjustment. Convalescence from an emotional operation, such as dissolution of a 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 break up 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 their 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. In order for a child to enjoy a healthy development, it is important for her or him to respect both parents.
8. Do not force or encourage your children to take sides. Doing this will encourage frustration, guilt and resentment in your children.
9. Dissolution of a marriage often leads to financial pressures on both parents. When there is a financial crisis, a parent's first impulse may be to keep the children from realizing it. Often, parents would rather make sacrifices themselves than ask their children to do so. The atmosphere is healthier when there is frankness and when children are expected to help.

10. Marriage breakdown is always hard on the children. They may not always show their distress or realize at first what this will mean to them. Parents should be direct and simple in telling children what is happening and why, and should communicate in a way that their child can understand and digest. This will vary with the circumstances and with each child's age and comprehension. The worst course is to try to hush things up and make a child feel he or she must not talk or even think about what he or she sees is going on. Unpleasant happenings need explanation. Explanations should be brief, prompt, direct and honest.

11. The guilt you may feel about the marriage breakdown may interfere in your disciplining your 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. Do not overlook the fact that you are only human and admit it. You will not be able to make a 100% score on being the perfect parent (no one ever does in good times or bad times). When in your attempts, 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 parenting discussion – whether face to face or over the telephone – rather than permit the discussion to escalate into an argument, make an agreement with your spouse that whichever of you is uncomfortable will state her or his discomfort and have permission to end the discussion without further explanation. Both parents should understand this may include hanging up the phone if it is a telephone discussion – or walking away if it is a face to face discussion. The parent terminating the discussion should recontact the other parent within 48 hours to continue the discussion.

14. Read and reread these basic guidelines. Add to them by writing down your own constructive positive approaches to the handling of your new way of living. Discuss, when practicable, your thoughts and feelings with other people you trust and with whom you feel comfortable and benefit by sharing their positive attitudes.