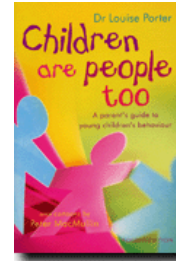


## HELPING CHILDREN ADJUST TO PARENTAL SEPARATION AND DIVORCE

an extract from

Porter, L. (2006). *Children are people too*, (4<sup>th</sup> ed.) Adelaide, East Street.



Despite the urban myth that 'divorce is too easy', no one ends a marriage or long-term partnership lightly: it is a last resort for partners who have lost hope of a fulfilling relationship. And, despite cries of doom and gloom over the divorce rate, marriages today have a better chance of lasting 30 years than ever before, simply because in the past one of the partners would have died within that time frame (McDonald 1993).

Despite the impulse that many parents feel to 'stay together for the sake of the children', many children feel sad and guilty at being the reason for their parents' ongoing unhappiness, and are relieved when their parents finally choose to separate. Nevertheless, their parents' separation commonly presents children with many challenges that add to the normal demands of growing up. They must acknowledge the reality of their parents' separation; disengage from their parents' conflict so that they can get on with their own lives; resolve their grief, anger and self-blame about the divorce; accept that their parents' separation is permanent; and form realistic expectations for their own future adult relationships (King 1992).

The positive side of this picture is that, now that divorce is possible, parents who are in conflict are able to separate. All the research tells us that children are better off in a divorced family than when living with ongoing family conflict (Burns & Goodnow 1985). The detrimental effects on children that we think are caused by the divorce are instead felt mainly when the conflict between the parents has continued after their separation.

### Explain the separation

It can be difficult for you to know what to tell your children about your marital separation. In the early days, you might not even know yourself what is going to happen. Compared with younger children, adolescents might have a better understanding of why their parents cannot live together, although this does not necessarily make it any less painful for them (Newman 2004). You might start by telling your children that you and their other parent have left each other, but that you have not left them. The children need to know that each of you still loves them. Explain that a parent's love for a child never goes away: it's a kind of 'within me' love. When adults love other adults, sometimes, sadly, that kind of love does stop. While explaining this, make sure that the children know that your separation was not due to anything they did or did not do.

### Enlist support from other adults

If your emotions are too raw to talk much about your separation, perhaps you could ask a relative to speak to your children. This is often an important role

for the grandparents (as well as for the children), as it can reassure the older family members that they will continue to be significant to their grandchildren, even though it may be their son or daughter who has left the family home.

### **Do not belittle your former partner**

Despite any bitterness you may feel, *never* talk negatively about your children's absent parent. Family roots are a source of self-esteem for children. This means that they will devalue themselves if they think that one of their parents is unworthy. And criticising the other parent forces children to choose between the two of you, with the result that they may distance themselves from you both.

### **Continue joint parenting**

A separation or divorce involving children can never be final. You can end your marriage or partnership, but the parenting side of your relationship will go on. Therefore, whether you continue to parent alone or eventually re-partner, you will need to negotiate major issues such as schooling or behavioural difficulties with your children's birth parent. Even though no longer living together, the two of you must be able to continue to act together in your children's interests. For some, counselling may be the only way you can get to this point.

### **Negotiate access**

Although at times it can seem that life would be much simpler if you did not have to negotiate the children's access with your former partner, these visits reflect *children's* right to see both of their parents. Your children need you to be grown up and not indulge any bitterness or anger you might feel. Children who recover from the separation or divorce of their parents are those whose parents continue to relate warmly with them.

Even though you will naturally feel betrayed if your spouse had a new partner already on the horizon towards the end of your relationship, this third person did not cause the break-up of your marriage, as people cannot fall in love with someone if they are already in love. And even when your partner was the one to instigate the separation, this does not make him or her a bad *parent*. Equally, his or her new partner is not necessarily a bad parent and is seldom justification for your children to discontinue contact with their other parent.

As a mother who has been your children's primary carer, you might feel jealous that, after all you have done for them, your children now want to live equally with each parent. If their father had little day-to-day care of the children during your relationship, it can be difficult to trust that he can take adequate care of them during access visits or shared custody.

As a father, if you did little of the day-to-day parenting prior to your separation, you might find it demanding to cope with the many tasks involved at the same time as getting to know your children more intimately and helping them through their turbulent emotions. If the children are unsettled, you might think that they would be better off without you in the picture. They are not.

If having to form a meaningful relationship with your children for the first time, just keep in mind those things that you do to maintain relationships with your work colleagues (Rodwell 2002): spend time sharing an enjoyable activity, talk with them about their interests, or just chill out together at home.

### **Get on with your life**

Even if the separation was not of your choosing, get on with your life. If you do not make an effort to design new ways to be happy, your children will worry about you and will not be able to get on with their own lives either. Therefore, satisfy yourself that you are still meeting their needs, and then give yourself permission to meet yours.

Sometimes, well-meaning relatives try to comfort children with the instruction to 'Look after Mum now that Dad is gone' or they console a son with the notion that he is, 'The man of the house' now. Even without such prompts, some children voluntarily take on the job of looking after you. To avoid burdening your children with this responsibility, make sure to tell them that, although there will be times when everyone will feel very sad, each parent will still be able to look after him- or herself *and* the children. Ensure that the children know that you can cope with – even enjoy – the time alone while they are visiting their other parent. If they feel you need them to be there for you, they might invent excuses for not seeing their other parent, which will be to everyone's detriment. The only exception is that children with antisocial or abusive fathers are better adjusted when their father is *not* present in their lives (Jaffee et al. 2003).

### **Tell the truth about a neglectful parent**

When children are genuinely neglected by an absent parent, it will be useless and hurtful to pretend otherwise. Instead, explain to young abandoned children that while the absent parent will always love them (because parental love never goes away), that parent is 'lazy' about showing his or her love. You could tell older children that the absent parent is 'irresponsible about relationships'. Unfortunately, you cannot protect your children in cases where this is reality, and they can only benefit from being allowed to grieve over their very real loss.

### **Minimise compound losses**

After the initial upheaval of parental separation, family members can experience additional losses that compound their grief. The children might have to move house (sometimes frequently because of the transience of rental accommodation), change school or neighbourhoods with a consequential dislocation from friends, or might have to start child care or attend out-of-school-hours care as their mother returns to the work force or increases her hours of paid employment. Sometimes, these changes cannot be avoided for financial reasons. But, if possible, try to space the changes a few months apart, to give everyone time to adjust to each new change before another one happens.

## **Do not allow your children to exploit your grief for them**

Following your separation, your main regret might be that your children now miss out on daily contact with their other parent. Some will exploit this guilt, accusing you of destroying your marriage, or demanding to live with their other parent when they are angry at you. Don't take demands made during an argument seriously, but do examine them later when tempers have settled.

## **CONCLUSION**

Your children will cope with family upheavals as long as you can stay in charge and lead the family through its crisis. While you are going through a trauma, you do not have to have all the answers – or even pretend that you do – but you do need to reassure the children that you are working the issues out and will continue to look after yourself and them while you are deciding what needs to be done. If you need support to respond to the challenges, consult your local community health service, family therapist or other relevant specialist so that the family can emerge from its trials better, not bitter.

In the long term, the differences in adjustment between children of divorced and intact families are small (Amato 2000). Whether in the longer-term (within two to three years), children return to their pre-divorce levels of adjustment depends on:

- how the children view their parents' divorce: approximately one-third believe it is their fault, while others are relieved to see an end to their parents' misery and their own victimhood, particularly in violent families;
- the children's ability to use active coping in contrast with avoidance or distraction;
- their sense of control over events;
- the level of social support they receive;
- whether the economic hardships (particularly experienced by women) endure and later restrict the children's opportunities;
- the quality or responsiveness of parenting that the children receive;
- whether the couple's conflict is resolved by their separation;
- their parents' subsequent emotional adjustment;
- whether the children can maintain high-quality contact with the non-residential parent (although contact with abusive parents is detrimental) (Amato 2000; Dunn 2004; Dunn et al. 2004; Spence et al. 2002).

It seems that when children experience *persistent* emotional difficulties following their parents' divorce, they would have developed these problems anyway (D'Onofrio et al. 2007), while any antisocial behaviour is due not to their parents' separation itself, but to the acrimony, parenting problems and socioeconomic difficulties that preceded and contributed to the divorce (Amato 2000; D'Onofrio et al. 2007).

## FURTHER RESOURCES

- Burrett, J. (1999). *But I want to stay with you: Talking with children about separation and divorce*. Sydney: Simon and Schuster.
- Porter, L. (2006). *Children are people too: A parent's guide to young children's behaviour*. (4th ed.) Adelaide, SA: East Street Publications.
- Teyber, E. (2001). *Helping children cope with divorce*. (2nd ed.) San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Wells, R. (1997). *Helping children cope with divorce*. London: Sheldon.
- Weyburne, D. (1999). *What to tell the kids about your divorce*. Oakland, CA: Harbinger.
- [www.louiseporther.com.au](http://www.louiseporther.com.au)

## REFERENCES

- Amato, P.R. (2000). The consequences of divorce for adults and children. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 62 (4), 1269-1287.
- Burns, A. & Goodnow, J. (1985). *Children and families in Australia*. (2nd ed.) Sydney: Allen and Unwin.
- D'Onofrio, B.M., Turkheimer, E., Emery, R.E., Maes, H.H., Silberg, J. & Eaves, L.J. (2007). A children of twins study of parental divorce and offspring psychopathology. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 48 (7), 667-675.
- Dunn, J. (2004). Annotation: Children's relationships with their nonresident fathers. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 45 (4), 659-671.
- Dunn, J., Cheng, H., O'Connor, T.G. & Bridges, L. (2004). Children's perspectives on their relationships with their nonresident fathers: Influences, outcomes and implication. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 45 (3), 553-566.
- Jaffee, S.R., Moffitt, T.E., Caspi, A. & Taylor, A. (2003). Life with (or without) father: The benefits of living with two biological parents depend on the father's antisocial behavior. *Child Development*, 74 (1), 109-126.
- King, H.E. (1992). The reactions of children to divorce. In C.E. Walker and M.C. Roberts (Eds.) *Handbook of clinical child psychology*. (2nd ed.) New York: Plenum, pp. 1009-1024.
- McDonald, P. (1993). *Family trends and structure in Australia*. Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies.
- Newman, M. (2004). *Stepfamily life: Why it is different and how to make it work*. Sydney: Finch.
- Rodwell, J. (2002). *Repartnered families*. Auckland, NZ: Penguin.
- Spence, S.H., Najman, J.M., Bor, W., O'Callaghan, M.J. & Williams, G.M. (2002). Maternal anxiety and depression, poverty and marital relationship factors during early childhood as predictors of anxiety and depressive symptoms in adolescence. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 43 (4), 457-469.