

GUIDELINES FOR PARENTS

DURING SEPARATION AND DIVORCE

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

CHILDREN COME FIRST

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 and needs, but try, try, try.

KEEP A POSITIVE ATTITUDE

Maintain your own composure and good emotional balance as much as possible. In talking to yourself, verbally and in your thoughts, remember, separation is not the end of the world. Laugh when you can and try to keep a sense of humour. What your children see in your attitudes is reflected in theirs.

TIME HEALS ALL WOUNDS

Allow yourself and your children time for readjustment. Convalescence from an emotional operation, such as a breakdown of relationship, is essential.

BE A SELECTIVE HISTORIAN

Remember the best parts of your marriage. Share them with your children and use them constructively.

YOU ARE NOT ALONE

Assure your children that they are not to blame for the break up and that they are not being rejected or abandoned. Children, especially the young ones, 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 mum or dad.

LISTEN TO YOUR CHILDREN

By sympathetic to their concerns but affirm and reaffirm often that you are not a referee or mediator between your children and the other parent. Do not believe everything you hear from your children – check it out.

LET GO OF YOUR ANGER

Continuing anger or bitterness toward your spouse can injure your children far more than the marriage breakdown itself. The feelings you show are often more important than the words you use.

RESPECT YOUR EX

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 your child to respect both parents. Remember your children are part of each of you and to criticize your spouse is to criticize half of your child.

BE COURTEOUS

Do not honk your horn for your children to come out. Walk to the other parent's door, but do not go in unless invited. Have children ready to go. Send and return children who are clean, well rested and fed. Do not send or return a suitcase full of dirty clothes. Do not use call display or an answering machine to screen calls from the other parent or limit telephone contact between your children and the other parent. Always be on time. Smile.

LEAVE THE CHILDREN OUT OF IT

Do not force or encourage your children to take sides. Do not use your children as a go-between for arranging time with children or about money. Do not ask your children for information about the other parent's household, friends, activities etc.

BE HONEST WITH YOUR CHILDREN

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. The atmosphere is healthier when there is frankness and when children are expected to help.

RESPECT YOUR CHILD'S EMOTIONS

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 in telling children what is happening and why, in a way each 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 they must not talk or even think about what they see is going on. Unpleasant happenings need an explanation. This explanation should be brief, prompt, direct and honest.

BE CONSISTENT

The guilt parents may feel about the marriage breakdown may interfere in disciplining their 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. Do not second guess the other parent about discipline – ask.

NOBODY IS PERFECT

Admit the fact that you are only human. You will not be able to be the perfect parent (no one ever is – in good or bad times). When you make a mistake, acknowledge it, apologise and resolve to attempt to improve day by day.