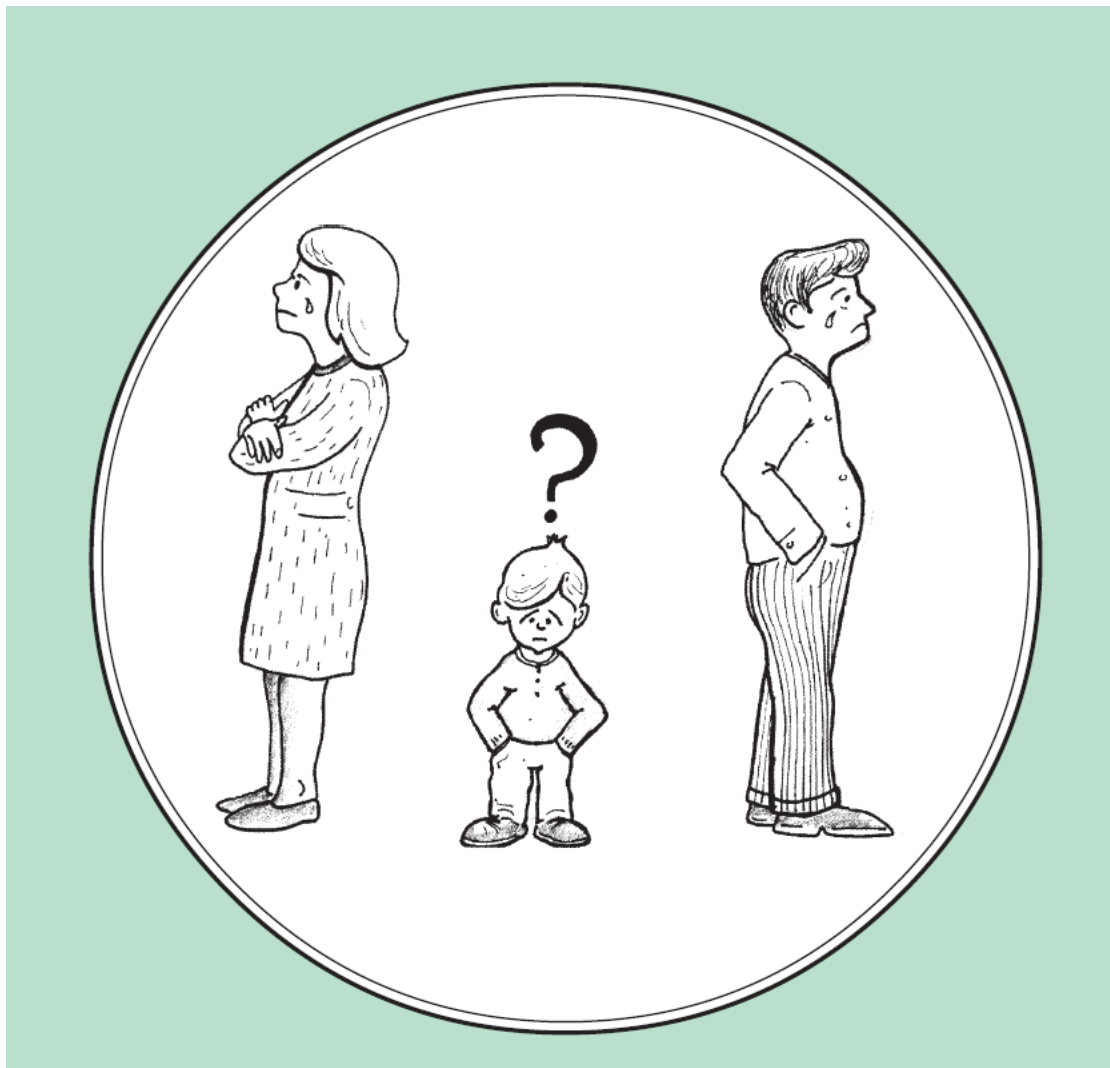


How to help children when parents separate



**West Lothian Child and Adolescent
Mental Health Services
(CAMHS)**

Guidelines for separated or divorced parents on how best to help children

Introduction

This leaflet covers some general points about the best way of helping children whose parents are separated. All parents want to do their best for their children, but sometimes it can be difficult to take account of the children's needs when you are going through such a difficult time yourself. There might be a lot of tension or bitterness amongst the adults, and it can be easy to lose sight of the children's feelings when you are overwhelmed with painful emotions.

Planning a separation

If you are planning to separate, but have not yet done so, here are some points you might like to consider:

- Tell the children only after you have made a final decision. It would not be helpful to alarm them if the discussions are at an early stage and the possible separation may not happen.
- Take account of the child's age when deciding the best time to break the news. For a young child, a week or two before the split would be ideal. A primary age child will need a few weeks (say 4-6) to get used to the idea, while a teenager may need even longer. Of course, some separations happen with no warning.
- Give children permission to talk to friends about the divorce and let them know that many children have divorced parents so they are not alone.
- One of children's biggest concerns at this time is practical issues such as where they will live, who will take them to school, where they will sleep and so on. Give them as much information as you can about these things.
- Reassure them that the separation is not their fault. Many children secretly believe that they must be to blame, and if only they hadn't behaved badly, this would never have happened.

- Reassure them that they will not be abandoned.
- Reassure children that both adults will go on being parents for ever and still love them.
- Be honest about why the split happened, but don't burden the child with too many details which might turn them against one parent. It might be best to miss out details about such things as impotence, affairs, or homosexuality, sticking instead to general points about 'parents not loving each other any more' and 'not being able to live together peacefully'.
- Try to avoid blaming one parent, however strongly you feel about it. On the other hand, painting a picture that is too rosy can make a child wonder why the separation needs to happen. This can be a difficult tightrope for you to walk.
- Make time to really listen to your child's feelings. Acknowledge that he might well feel angry, upset or insecure. Encourage him to ask questions. Try to accept whatever he says and feels without being defensive.
- It might help to tell your child's teachers what is happening, so they can be supportive and understanding of any difficult behaviour.
- There are lots of books about divorce for children. Get them from the library, or buy them, and read them together with your child. This will give information, and reassure the child that other children have also experienced this.

When parents have split up

For parents who have already split up, there are many points to consider about how to handle access visits. It can be very difficult to consider the children's needs when you might be feeling hurt and bitter yourself. Below there are some general points about life after separation, which have been written following many studies on the effects of divorce on children:

- Don't burden children with all your worries. They have enough of their own. Try to use adult friends or relatives as counsellors.
- Don't allow any feelings of guilt make you over-protective or under-protective of children.

- Don't drag children into quarrels between the parents or expect them to take sides.
- Try not to say bad things to a child about the other parent. You may not like your partner any more, but he or she is still the child's parent. It can be very damaging for children to hear such things, making them confused and unsure if they are still allowed to love the other parent. Frequent exposure to your anger and bitterness can hurt the child.
- Allow the child to retain his positive feelings for the other parent and to talk freely about that parent, even though you might find this difficult. A child should not have to edit his speech for your benefit.
- Keep hostility under control between you and your ex-partner when your child is present.
- Keep arguments about money away from the children. They have a right to see the other parent that does not depend on how much that parent is paying towards their care. Avoid trying to get the child on your 'side' by comments such as: 'we could buy you new trainers if your father wasn't so irresponsible about paying me maintenance,' or: 'I don't see why he should be allowed to see you this weekend - if he cared about you he would send enough money.'
- Some children can attempt to reunite parents by becoming ill or behaving badly in an attempt to force their parents to work jointly on the problem. Try to prevent this by informing them, several times, that there is nothing they can do to change your decision.

Practicalities of access visits

Many children appear to be somewhat upset before and after an access visit. This does not necessarily mean that they don't enjoy the visit, or that they don't want to return home afterwards.

Children can sense your anxiety and tension about the whole thing and may respond to this. Some may, without realising it, try to please you by seeming to be unhappy about seeing their other parent.

- Try to make the handover as smooth as possible and keep it free from arguments. If you are not able to achieve this, then use a third party to deliver the child.
- Do not ask children to carry messages, either written or spoken, from one parent to the other. Such messages are usually unwelcome to the receiver and it can make the children feel like the bringer of bad tidings.
- Don't use children as spies to check out aspects of your ex-partner's new life. It can make children feel disloyal to be quizzed about the other household. A genuine unselfish interest in how the children spent their time on a visit will come across to them as honest and welcome, but they will be confused and upset by an interrogation.
- Allow favourite toys and clothes to be taken from house to house so the child has some continuity and security. If a favourite jumper comes back shrunk from the wash, try to resist the temptation to blame your ex-partner, at least while your child is listening!
- Stick to agreed times for access. It can be devastating for a child to be sitting with coat on, watching at the window for a parent to pick them up - and waiting and waiting. It can also lead to a lot of bitterness and anxiety if the child is returned home late at the end of the visit, and this can rebound on the child. There is a correct place and time to discuss altering access hours, so don't use children as pawns to prove your point.
- Some children may be reluctant to talk about their other parent, perhaps because they sense that you don't like it. Don't mistake this for being uninterested in the other parent.
- Research shows that children are least damaged in the long term when they have harmonious contact with their non-custodial parent, with parents co-operating to achieve this.

Final words

Making arrangements for children in the midst of anxiety, tension and bitterness can be difficult. However, many families do manage to settle into new routines if parents are keen to put their differences aside where the children are concerned, and suitable arrangements can work well.

Nearly all children would prefer that their parents had not split up, however bad the marriage was, and some can be distressed for quite long periods. However, many are settling a year later and by two years have come to terms with the new situation, provided mum and dad are working together as parents, even if not as partners.

Further copies of this booklet may be obtained from:

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