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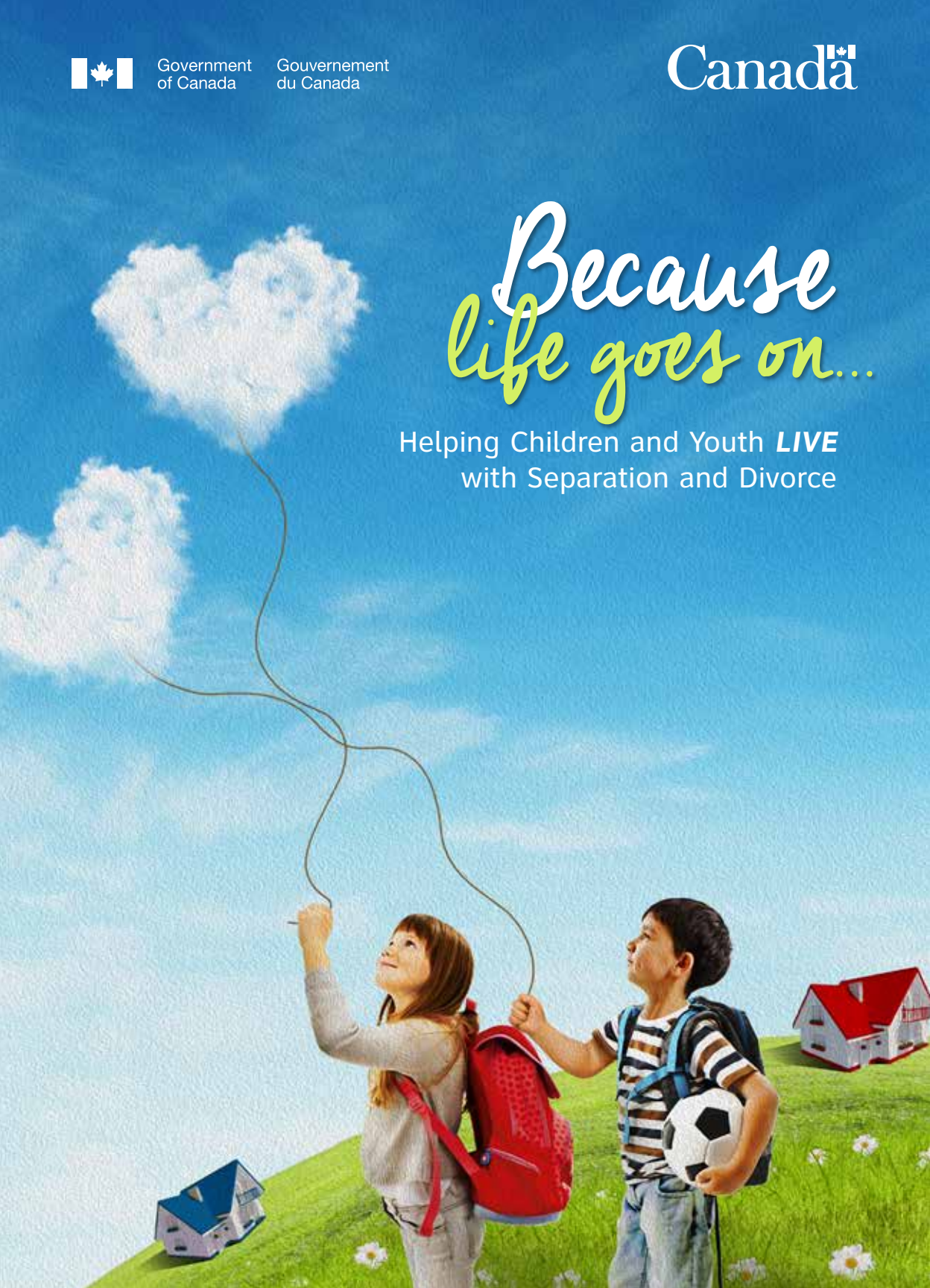
Because life goes on...

Helping Children and Youth ***LIVE*** with Separation and Divorce



Because life goes on ...

HELPING CHILDREN AND YOUTH ***LIVE*** WITH SEPARATION AND DIVORCE

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

TO PROMOTE AND PROTECT THE HEALTH OF CANADIANS THROUGH LEADERSHIP, PARTNERSHIP, INNOVATION AND ACTION IN PUBLIC HEALTH.

—Public Health Agency of Canada

Également disponible en français sous le titre :
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Section 1
INTRODUCTION

HOW *BECAUSE LIFE GOES ON …* CAN HELP YOU AND YOUR CHILDREN

For separating parents, a big question on their minds is often "how will this affect the kids?"

Separation is a time of significant changes for children. (See box ***A Word About the Language of Separation and Divorce***.) At any age, children may feel upset or angry at the prospect of their parents splitting up and anxious about the changes that will affect their daily lives.

Whether you are the father or the mother, it's normal to feel uncertain about how to give your children the right support to help them adjust to the changes and grow up strong and resilient. It may seem like uncharted territory, but proven strategies have helped parents successfully navigate through this unsettling time.

Because Life Goes On … was first published by Health Canada in 1994, followed by a second edition in 2000. In the two decades since the first edition was published, a wealth of research has shed new light on what parents can do to help their children successfully adapt to the separation. For example, in general children do best when:

- their parents work to control and reduce their conflict
- they receive nurturing and consistent parenting from at least one parent
- their parents take care of their own mental health and well-being
- they continue to have meaningful relationships with both parents

This third Edition of *Because Life Goes On …* has been designed to complement the resources and services that are available in your province or territory and Justice Canada publications about separation and divorce. (See Section 11—***Resources*** for more information on how to access these excellent resources.)

Contained in these pages are sections that address:

- what your children need, based on their age and stage of development
- how you can better manage your own challenges and needs
- practical things that you can do to support your children's growth and resilience. (See box ***What Is Resilience?*** in Section 5.)

As adults, parents have the ability to govern their actions and choices. Granted, some things are not in your control. But using some of the tools and tips described in these pages can go a long way in helping you manage your own emotions and strengthen your children's resilience.

One of the best things that you can do for your children is sometimes one of the most difficult—reducing conflict with your former partner. A high degree of conflict between parents nearly always results in difficulties for children, and these difficulties may last a lifetime. The good news for parents is that there are now tools and methods available that can help you minimize conflict and maximize your positive involvement with your children—no matter what the situation.

EVERY SITUATION IS UNIQUE

Just as every family is unique, so too are the particulars surrounding each separation. For example, some separations involve parents with young children, while others occur when the children are older. Some separations are amicable, while others are full of strife or may have safety issues. (See box ***If You're Worried About Safety***.) Some separations are between common-law partners, while others involve married partners. Some separations involve same-sex partners while others involve heterosexual partners. But whatever the circumstance, children have similar needs, depending on their age and stage of development.

The information in *Because Life Goes On …* will not cover every situation or address every aspect of Canada's diverse cultures. But almost all parents are likely to find some useful information contained in these pages. After all, we all share a common humanity.

If You're Worried About Safety

If you or your children have been abused or feel unsafe around the other parent, you need to put safety first. If you are concerned about your safety or your children's safety, see ***"When There Is Violence in the Home"*** in Section 8 for information on family violence and where to find immediate and longer-term assistance. You should also keep in mind that some of the information contained in this resource may not be appropriate to your situation. Help is available; reach out now.

HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

Use the Table of Contents to help guide you. For example, if you find a section that appears relevant and helpful, read on. If other sections or topics seem less relevant to your situation, pass over them and move on. Use your judgment based on your family's unique situation and your specific needs or concerns. You know your children best.

If you want more detailed information on a specific topic covered in this resource or information on topics not covered within (such as family law and child support payments), check out Section 11— ***Resources***. Among other things, it contains information on how to access resources and services available from your province or territory and Justice Canada.

SEPARATION: THE CASCADING CHANGES FOR CHILDREN

It's common for people to think of separation as an event—the decision is announced and one parent moves out. But separation is not a single event; it is a series of changes, each of which has an impact on children. It may be helpful to think of separation as a process involving three stages:

- **Before.** The parental conflict or underlying issues that lead to the separation
- **During.** Children are told about their parents' decision to separate and one parent moves out, or both parents move to new homes
- **After.** Adjustment to different living situations, schedules, parenting roles and new parental partners

Separation is a process that can go on for several years involving many life changes and decisions—and all of them have an impact on children. Just knowing that things are going to be different after the separation can cause fears for most children.

It's helpful to think about the number of changes that may occur for children when their parents separate. First, they must come to terms with the loss of both parents living together. Next, children need to adjust to being with their parents in two separate homes. Perhaps there is a geographic move or change in schools. With one or the other parent starting to date, a whole other set of changes and challenges occur. The same is true if their parents form a blended family, whether they legally marry or not.

With each major change, children's ability to cope may diminish, especially if their parents are less available to support their needs. Changes are inevitable with a separation, but children do better when they have time both to prepare and adapt to each change. At all ages, children need careful preparation and time to adjust. Preteens and adolescents need even more time to adjust to the changes. Practical suggestions to help your children adapt to the changes are provided in later sections.

A Word About the Language of Separation or Divorce

Although the terms “separation” and “divorce” may seem interchangeable, under the law they mean different things.

A “separation” is when a couple decides to live apart from each other because the relationship has ended. A couple that separates may be married or have been living together in a common-law relationship. After they separate, married couples may also divorce. A “divorce” is when a court officially ends a marriage. Only legally married couples can divorce.

Provincial and territorial family laws apply when a married couple separates but does not apply for a divorce and when an unmarried couple separates. (See box ***Family Law: Where to Turn for Information and Guidance.***) The *Divorce Act* applies to married couples who have divorced or who have applied for a divorce.

In this booket, the term “separation” will be used throughout to refer to all couples ending their relationship, regardless of their legal status.

Family Law: Where to Turn for Information and Guidance

Where to start?

If you have questions about the legal aspects of parenting after separation and divorce, you can find more information under "Family Law" on the Department of Justice Canada website.

Your province or territory offers programs and services for separating or divorcing parents, including parent information programs. To see a list of these services, visit the Justice Canada web page under "Family Law", click on "Family Justice Services".

It is important to remember that family law issues can be complex. A family law lawyer can give you legal advice about all the different factors that are important in your situation.

There are many options for coming to agreements about co-parenting arrangements, without going to court. A family law lawyer can help you determine what option is best in your circumstances. When choosing a lawyer, talk to potential family law lawyers about their style to see if they are a good fit for you. For example, some lawyers focus their practice on mediation, negotiation and taking a collaborative approach to resolving issues.

Section 2

TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF: INSIDE AND OUT

Everyone who travels by air is familiar with the instructions to "put on your own mask first before assisting your children." It's the same in life—parents are the first and most important caretakers, teachers and role models for children. Parents have the greatest influence on a child's developing self-worth, ability to learn, and to cope with life's challenges. If parents are well—emotionally and physically—then their children are more likely to be well, too. Unfortunately, the opposite may also be true.

TAKING CARE OF YOUR MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

One of the most important challenges for parents going through a separation is to take good care of their mental and physical health. Easier said than done, given that divorce can be one of the most stressful experiences in life, second only to the death of a spouse or child. We all know that eating well, and getting regular exercise and enough sleep are things that will improve our mental and physical health. But other than these obvious self-care mantras, self-care will be different for different people, as we each have our own unique set of needs, experiences and expectations. What's important is to find the things that help you reduce stress and feel better. Below are a few tips for you to consider.

Acknowledge that things are hard. We often think of vulnerability as a sign of weakness or associate it with emotions we would rather avoid, such as shame, fear and uncertainty. But recent research is showing that, when we understand and acknowledge our fears, what we believe are our shortcomings and what causes us shame, we grow in strength and maturity. In turn, opening up about ourselves with other trusted people in our lives can deepen our connection with others as well as strengthen our own self-awareness.

Painful feelings about a failed relationship or marriage are inevitable. Writing down these feelings or discussing them with a trusted person can help you to move through and beyond them, much like working through feelings of grief after a loved one's death. If you avoid working through your feelings of hurt, anger and grief, sooner or later you may find these bottled-up feelings producing more inner turmoil or spilling out through self-defeating actions.

Connect with others. The end of your relationship can have a ripple effect on the relationships you shared as a couple. Family members and friends may "take sides" or simply back away, while dealing with their own uncomfortable or conflicting feelings. At the same time, an active social support network can help you make your way through the emotional upheavals brought about by the separation.

Spending time with people helps ward off loneliness and strengthens one's sense of belonging. A rupture in the family can diminish a sense of belonging, and even one's own sense of identity. Friendships increase a sense of self-worth; just knowing you're not alone can go a long way toward coping with stress.

Tapping into your social network can give you access to information, guidance and other types of assistance when you need them. It's comforting to know that you have people you can turn to for both practical and moral support. Remember that the goal of maintaining

your social support network is to reduce your stress level, not to add to it. Watch for situations that seem to drain your energy level. For example, avoid spending time with someone who is constantly negative and critical, especially toward your ex-partner. Although this may feel supportive, over time it could interfere with your ability to form a cooperative co-parenting relationship in the best interest of your children.

Do something pleasurable for yourself every day. Children are naturally drawn to play and fun activities. They aren't self-conscious about having fun or think fun is frivolous. Now is a good opportunity to learn from your children. Whether it's playing a quick game of hoops, taking a bath, watching some television, or connecting on social media, try to schedule something fun or relaxing every day.

Breathe. Simple relaxation tools, such as deep breathing and relaxing imagery, have been proven to be very effective in managing stress and reducing anger. Just because it's simple doesn't mean it isn't effective.

Some simple steps you can try:

- Breathe deeply from your diaphragm, because breathing from your chest doesn't work. Practise breathing deeply by placing your hand on your lower belly as it rises and falls. Picture your breath coming up from your "gut."
- Slowly repeat a calm word or phrase such as "relax" or "take it easy." Repeat it to yourself while breathing deeply.
- Visualize a relaxing experience, either from your memory or imagination.
- Do some gentle muscle-stretching exercises to relax and soothe your muscles.

Do what is true to you. Our identity is partly derived from our family history, our sense of self, our roles and our relationships. When a significant relationship ends, your identity may seem to go with it—"Who am I now?; What do I believe about love and relationships?; Who do I want to be?"

Talk or write about what matters to you. Make choices that feel the most real to who you are and who you want to become. Think of all the energy that gets wasted when we compare ourselves to others or try to meet their expectations. Focus your energy, instead, on restoring your mental well-being and doing things that are most important to you.

Ask for help. For parents, separation can be an emotional roller coaster. You may experience feelings of anger, isolation, anxiety, euphoria, grief, relief, depression, guilt, loss of control, fear, worthlessness and insecurity. These emotions and difficulties are a natural part of getting through a separation or divorce. It's not uncommon during times of stress and change to experience depression or anxiety. (See box ***Some Tips for Reducing, Preventing and Coping with Stress.***) However, when depression or anxiety becomes intense and overwhelming or lasts for more than about a month, it is time to reach out to your family doctor or a counsellor. Your family doctor or a mental health professional can help you clarify and learn more about the problem you are experiencing and help you find the appropriate treatment and support.

Keep in mind that mental health is not the absence of problems. Rather, it is demonstrated by our determination to look at our inner strengths and our ability to be aware of our fears and challenges. Everyone experiences mental health problems at different times in their life. The question is not whether we have the capacity to completely avoid these problems, but what we can do to release the suffering they cause and to feel better.

If you are in crisis, call the nearest distress centre or 9-1-1 or go to your local emergency department.

Some Tips for Reducing, Preventing and Coping with Stress

Separation is by its nature a stressful situation. So is developing a new cooperative parenting relationship with your ex-partner. These transitions may involve strong emotional feelings and are certain to involve changes. There are many healthy ways to manage and cope with stress, but they usually require changing your perspective and automatic reactions.

Here are some suggested techniques and strategies that may help you manage stress during and after the separation. It's helpful to think of the "4 A's" of stress management: Avoid, alter, adapt and accept. Focus on what strategies will help you feel calm and in control. In other words, the situation will change when your reaction to it changes.

Avoid unnecessary stress. There's no way around it, separation is a very stressful life situation. Even so, think about other stressors that you may be able to eliminate. For example:

- **Learn how to say "no."** The process of separation requires making changes and adapting to them. Some previous commitments or activities in your life may need to be dropped for the time being.
- **Downsize your to-do list.** Go over your list and try to distinguish between the "shoulds" and the "musts." Then, prioritize your list and drop tasks that aren't truly necessary.

- **Ask for help.** Stress is inevitable when we tell ourselves "I can handle this myself." Instead of toughing it out, why not reach out to your network of friends and family for help from time to time? Whether it's taking the children to activities or helping them with schoolwork, your support network may be more willing to lend a hand than you might think. But you have to ask first.

Alter the situation. You can't avoid your ex-partner. You are parents for life. But you may be able to find ways to change how you engage with your former partner.

- **Express your feelings and release your emotions, rather than holding them inside.** Before engaging with your ex-partner, try venting your feelings with a trusted friend who can help you release the emotions that may be clouding your judgment and limiting your choices. At all costs, avoid venting your feelings about your ex-partner in front of the children. Reach out to other adults.
- **Be willing to compromise.** If you ask your ex-partner to change a behaviour, then be willing to do the same. If you both are willing to bend at least a little, you have a better chance at finding a middle ground.

Adapt to the stressor. If co-parenting with your ex-partner is stressing you out, perhaps it's best to regain your sense of control by changing your expectations and attitude.

- **Reframe problems.** Try to view stressful situations with your ex-partner from a different angle. Look at the situation from your children's point of view. Keeping in mind that children do better when both parents are actively involved in their lives, how can the issue be reframed around "in the best interests of the children?"

- **Look at the big picture.** Get perspective on the relative importance of the disagreement with your ex-partner. Ask yourself how important it will be for you and the children in the long run—a week, a month, a year? Is it really worth getting upset over? If the answer is no, focus your time and energy on things that matter the most.
- **Focus on the positive.** When stress is getting the best of you, take a moment to reflect on all the good things you appreciate in your life, including your children and your own positive qualities and talents. Some people find it useful to make a "gratitude list" every day.

Accept what you can't change. Some sources of stress can't be avoided. You can't change stressors such as a death of a loved one, the end of a relationship, or creating a new co-parenting relationship. In these situations, the best way to cope with a life-changing stressor is to accept things as they are. Remember that acceptance is not giving up responsibility or hope. Rather, acceptance helps you wisely focus your energy on things you can influence or change.

- **Avoid trying to control the uncontrollable.** Many things in life are beyond our control—particularly the behaviour of other people. Rather than continually stressing out over what your ex-partner says and does, focus on the things that you can control, such as the way you choose to react to problems.
- **Look for the upside.** When facing this major stressor of separation and continuing to cooperate with your ex-partner, try to look at them as opportunities for personal growth. If your own poor choices contributed to a stressful situation, reflect on the lessons you have learned and move on.

- **Learn to forgive.** Accept the fact that we all live in an imperfect world. Learn to let go of anger and resentments. Free yourself from negative energy by forgiving and moving on. You will feel better, and most likely, so will your children.

UNDERSTANDING HOW OUR HISTORY HAS SHAPED OUR PARENTING

Just as you are your child's first teacher, your parents were *yours*. The way your parents raised you has a major influence on your approach to parenting. The things your parents said and did, their way of relating to you and others, laid the foundation for many of your beliefs, values, attitudes, and parenting practices.

It is likely that you experienced some things that you want to recreate with your child—for instance, showing love through words and hugs, or teaching the value of effort and perseverance when confronted with challenges.

Then there are times when the child-rearing approach you learned from your own parents does not work well for you or your child. Maybe you were disciplined by being spanked or shamed. Or, you were never encouraged to express your feelings or talk about your problems. Or, you were made to believe that you were never good enough.

Research in the field of child development is showing how important it is for parents to figure out how their own childhood experience is playing out in their daily lives.[1]

[1] The concepts and self-reflection questions contained in this section were developed by **Daniel Siegel**, an author, educator and child psychiatrist. He has co-authored several books on child development and parenting, including *The Whole Brain Child*, *No-Drama Discipline* and *Parenting From the Inside Out* (the source of the material found in this section).

This understanding can help us be better parents, especially in helping children adapt to change and cope with challenges such as when their parents separate.

So, step back and look at the big picture. How does the way I was raised influence who I am today? Thinking about our childhood in this way leads to awareness about how it influences our thoughts, beliefs and behaviours. Awareness leads to choice, breaking the pattern of unconsciously repeating the past. Once we acknowledge and understand the role our past plays in our present, we can make peace with it.

The following questions may help you think about your past and how it might be influencing your life now:

- Imagine yourself as a child again. What would you tell your parents about how you were feeling or how you would have liked to be treated?
- How was your relationship with each parent similar? How was it different? Are there ways, now, that you try to be like or try *not* to be like either of your parents?
- Did you ever feel rejected or threatened by your parents? Were there other experiences that occurred which were traumatizing? Do these experiences still feel alive today? How to they continue to influence your life?
- How did your parents discipline you as a child? What impact did that have on your childhood, and how do you feel it affects your role as a parent now?
- Did anyone significant die in your childhood or later in life? Did your parents divorce? Do you think you were able to grieve that loss—as a child, or later as an adult? How do you think that loss has affected you now?
- If you had a difficult time during your childhood, where there other positive adults or other families around that you could depend on for nurturing and support?

- How do you think your childhood experiences might be influencing your relationships with others as an adult? Do you have patterns of behaviour that you want to or have tried to alter, but have difficulty changing?
- Are there parts of your childhood that are difficult to think about? Do you get the sense that there is a deep issue at play in your life, such as a feeling that you are un-deserving or "not good enough," or a sense of shame that you carry with you? Do you think these unresolved issues are having an impact on your parenting?
- Are there particular topics or conversations with your children that trigger a strong emotional response from you? Can you trace—from the experiences of your childhood (or later)—when and where this reaction might come from?

Freedom to choose. A life change such as a separation may actually be a good time to look back at the past and learn from it. By understanding the ways in which our past may be influencing our present, we then become free to choose new approaches to parenting our children.
(See box ***Understanding Conflict*** in Section 4.)
For example, if you:

- find yourself harshly disciplining your children because you lacked structure and rules in your own childhood, you can now choose to discipline them with firmness, but be guided by kindness and fairness
- tend to shy away from disciplining your children because you were harshly disciplined as a child, you now can choose to provide firm but loving limits that come with reasonable consequences when the rules are ignored
- felt like you needed to be perfect as a child, now is a good time to lighten up on yourself and your children
- were discouraged from sharing your feelings or bottled up your feelings for fear of judgment, you can consider ways to help both you and your children express emotions in a healthy way

- felt like you didn't get as much attention as your siblings, now is a good time to pay a little more attention to each child's interests and unique perspective on life
- find yourself being harsher on one child than the others, can you figure out from your own childhood experience why this pattern might have developed? With awareness comes change.

LEARNING TO LET GO OF ANGER

Anger is a normal emotion that tells us when we feel threatened or treated unfairly. It's what we do with the anger that can cause problems. Being in tune with our anger can help us respond to situations rather than react to them. It can help us stand up for ourselves in a firm but respectful way. (See ***"Understanding Anger"*** in Section 4.) But persistent or unresolved anger can be damaging to our mental well-being.

Research shows that anger can increase the chances of developing coronary heart disease, particularly in men, and can lead to stress-related problems such as insomnia, digestive problems, headaches and depression. Whatever form it takes, anger hurts everyone involved. Anger reinforces fears, feelings of vulnerability, guilt and misery. We all know, from personal experience and current events, that anger or blame does not solve problems or bring peace.

When the tension created by our negative thoughts and emotions seems unbearable, our tendency is to lash out at others or the world. Although it appears that other people or events are provoking us, it is often our own *interpretation* of the situation that is pushing our buttons and causing us to react.

The good news is that from the moment we recognize our role in the creation and reinforcement of our anger, we can decide to release ourselves from it and regain our peace of mind. This process requires time, determination, patience and gentleness—toward ourselves and

others. The prize is your own health and well-being and that of your children's. And as a positive role model, you will be giving your children examples they will carry into adulthood.

THREE KEY STEPS

There are three steps in letting go of anger.

The first step is to become aware of the source of our anger. A clue: We are rarely angry for the reasons we think. For example:

- We get angry when a current event brings up an old unresolved issue from the past. *Could old resentments and disappointments from your past relationship and break-up be fueling your current anger?*
- We are often angry because of our *interpretation* of what happened, often removing or denying our own role in the problem. *If this is the case, take the time to include your role in how the story unfolded. You are in there somewhere.*
- We may be angry because we didn't get what we needed as a child or, worse, we may have been hurt as a child. If we grow up believing that we are not worthy or that the world is not a safe place, our adult beliefs can be based on fear, anger and judgment. *Are there experiences from your childhood that could possibly be fueling your anger toward your ex-partner?*
- We often get angry when we see a behaviour in others that we don't like in ourselves. *Could this dynamic be fueling your anger toward your ex-partner? Is there something your former partner does that ignites your anger because it reminds you of how you sometimes think or act?*

The second step is to decide to let go of the anger. Letting go of anger is very different from trying to control it. It is a truth of human psychology that what we focus our attention on will grow. When we try to control powerful emotions, we are in fact doing the opposite. Control requires attention and focus, which only reinforces anger's hold on us.

The more we think about our negative thoughts and beliefs, the more the anger will grow and spill over onto every aspect of our lives. But if we decide to focus less on the anger and more on the positive things we want in our life, the anger will weaken. Then, the anger is reduced to thoughts that are no longer threaten our identity. Now we can decide to let it go and focus our attention on things that will bring us happiness and peace of mind.

The third step is to decide to put this new awareness into practice, one day at a time. Each time the negative thoughts creep into your consciousness and anger erupts, practise the first two steps. With practice you will develop new emotional muscles that will serve you well in all of your relationships, particularly with your children.

It's important to keep in mind that the objective of these steps is not to get rid of anger, but to reduce it by clearing your mind and deciding anew—every day—how you want to live your life. The benefits are many: a calmer demeanor, better decision-making, happier children and better relationships.

Letting go of your anger can help ease the process of separation with your ex-partner and protect your children from the damaging effects of conflict. The goal is to help you feel better over time, not to beat yourself up. Do not hesitate to get support from family, friends or professionals as you move forward to free yourself from anger and live a more fulfilled life.

LEARNING IMPORTANT LESSONS FROM THE PAST

In times of emotional crisis, there is an opportunity to learn and grow. To be able to move on, it's important to understand how the choices we made affected the crisis. Learning from mistakes is the key to not repeating them.

If they apply to your situation, here are some questions to ask yourself when you have some emotional distance from the break-up:

- Step back and look at the big picture. Were there any ways in which your choices or behaviour contributed to the problems in the relationship?
- Do you tend to make the same mistakes over and over again. If so, now is a good opportunity to look back, reflect on your thought or behaviour patterns that might be involved, and think of new or different ways you can engage in a relationship.
- Think about how you react to stress or deal with conflict and insecurities. Can you think of ways to help you respond to stress or conflict in a more constructive way?
- Do you accept other people the way they are, not the way they could or "should" be?
- Examine your negative feelings as a starting point for change. Are you aware of your feelings or are they in control of you?

The purpose of self-reflection is to help you grow from the challenges and further the healing process along. Try not to dwell on who is to blame or beat yourself up for past mistakes. As you look back on the relationship you have an opportunity to learn more about yourself, how you relate to others, and the issues you need to work on. Recovering from the end of a relationship is difficult. But it is important to know (and to keep reminding yourself) that you can and will move on. Healing takes time, so be patient and gentle with yourself.

Section 3

COMMUNICATING AND CONNECTING WITH YOUR CHILDREN

It's important to keep in mind that no matter how you as an adult understand or experience the situation, your children understand and experience it differently. (See box ***What I Want from My Parents: An Unspoken Wish List.***)

LOOKING AT SEPARATION THROUGH THE EYES OF YOUR CHILD

A good first step to help you look at separation through the eyes of a child is to focus on your own memories as a child. For example:

- When you were young, do you remember a time when you didn't understand what was going on, such as a fight between your parents or moving to a new home or school? Do you remember how you felt or how you tried to make sense of the situation?
- Do you remember where you were and how you felt when your parents told you sad or difficult news, like the death of a close relative or that they were getting a divorce?
- Do you remember what frightened you most as a young child, as a school-aged child, or as a teenager? Did you feel comfortable talking about your fears with your parents or other adults?

INFANTS AND YOUNG TODDLERS

Children younger than 2 are not able to understand the idea of parental separation. But they are very sensitive to any changes in their care or to the emotions that surround them. Even babies can sense a parent's distraction, stress or anger.

Because infants have no words and young toddlers only a few, they express their feelings the only way they know how—through crying and other behaviours. Infants and young toddlers are not able to manage their own emotions, so they depend on the consistent, day-to-day efforts of a loving adult to help them do so.

The best way for separating parents to help their infant or young toddler adapt to the changes is by ensuring the continuity and reliability of care for their physical and emotional needs. In addition to each parent's love and reliable presence, parents can protect their young ones from open hostility or conflict.

YOUNGER CHILDREN

It goes without saying that children are not little adults nor do they think like adults. Our ability to understand concepts such as cause and effect, the changing nature of feelings, or past, present and future—are either non-existent or newly emerging in a young child's consciousness.

A well-known psychologist and family mediator[2] tells a story that illustrates the difference between an adult and a child's understanding of separation.

> Two caring parents sat down with their preschool child to tell him as gently and maturely as possible about their upcoming divorce.

[2] This story was originally told by Joan Kelly, a psychologist known for her 45 years of research, practise and writing on the impact of separation and divorce on children and parents; divorce and custody mediation; and applying research to the development of parenting plans for children of all ages.

> They told him that Mommy and Daddy weren't going to live together anymore and that, although they would now live in separate houses, he would still see them both on a regular basis. They finished with the most important point of all "Mom and Dad will always continue to love you." When the parents asked if the young boy had any questions, he responded with "Who's going to look after me?"

This poignant story illustrates that young children have a limited ability to understand what is happening during a divorce, what they are feeling, and why. Children have difficulty thinking about a different reality than the one they know. Younger children simply don't have the cognitive or life skills and life experience to imagine what life will be like when their parents no longer live under one roof. That doesn't stop them, however, from trying to figure out "the big picture." Young children have not yet developed the capacity to see beyond themselves, which can let them believe that their personal thought has a direct effect on the rest of the world. For example, when young children experience something painful that they don't understand—like a death in the family or divorce—their minds can create a reason to feel responsible or try to reverse an event by thinking about it and wishing it didn't happen.

This self-centred tendency is why younger children often blame themselves or invent imaginary reasons for their parents' separation and divorce. "If only I had behaved better or helped Mom and Dad get along better, they would still be together," some children say to themselves. Or, they believe their parents will get back together, or wish that they would. Because of their limited ability to imagine the future, younger children cling to the only reality they know. Even children who have experienced or witnessed abuse may wish their parents would stay together. No matter what the circumstances, children generally develop a profound bond and a deep sense of loyalty to both parents. Why? Parents are the be all and end all in a child's life.

Because children first build their sense of self by watching and interacting with their parents, those children who witness parental arguing often experience it as if they are personally involved. Young children cannot separate themselves from their parents. Worse still, it is very hard for children to understand why the two most important people in their lives, on whom they depend for their very safety and survival, cannot get along.

PRETEENS AND TEENAGERS

Children of this age have a growing ability to understand human problems. At the same time, they are becoming their own person. Developmentally, preteens and teenagers are going through a lot of change. They experience conflicting emotions and needs—sometimes torn between wanting independence and protection, freedom and guidance, love and detachment. Whereas younger children typically view divorce as the enemy, preteens and teenagers tend to hold their parents accountable for the divorce. They will most likely react to their parents' news of separation with anger, and older teenagers may wonder about their own capacity to build good relationships.

It's important to be aware that the emotional experience of fear and anger is common to all children, just as it is to adults. But children, preteens and teenagers express it differently. As a basic human feeling, the experience of pain is at the heart of anger.

What I Want from My Parents: An Unspoken Wish List

- I need both of you to be in my life. When you don't stay involved, I feel like I am not important and I miss you a lot.
- When you fight in front of me, I want to run and hide.
- Please try hard to work together to raise me. I want you both to be my parents.
- It hurts me when you say negative things about my other parent, because I love them.
- Please don't ask me to take sides. I want to love you both. If you act jealous or upset, I feel like I need to take sides.
- I am afraid to tell you how I feel because it might hurt you, and I don't want to hurt you.
- Please communicate directly with my other parent so that I don't have to send messages back and forth. I don't want the job of being a messenger—I just want to be a kid.
- Please ask me my opinion when you need to make a decision about me. When you do, I feel loved, respected and more in control.
- Please take care of yourself and ask other adults to help you cope. When I see that you are taking care of yourself, I worry less and feel more secure that you will be there to take care of my needs.

TALKING TO YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT YOUR SEPARATION AND PREPARING THEM FOR CHANGE

Although talking to children about separation or divorce may be the hardest and most emotional step in the process, how parents handle this crucial step can set the pattern for future discussions and influence the level of trust children feel in the future. Take the time to handle this process thoughtfully and carefully. In particular, create a safe environment for these discussions with your children.

Just as separation is a process, talking with the children about the separation is not a one-time event. It is the beginning of an ongoing conversation with your children about their relationship with you and the other parent, the specific plans and details around how their lives will change, and the feelings that these changes bring up.

Telling your children that you are separating or getting a divorce will trigger a variety of responses, such as confusion, fear, sadness, anger, guilt, shock and relief. (See box ***Expect Tears, Protests and Lots of Questions.***) Your children will want to know that you will not abandon them, physically and emotionally.

Expect Tears, Protests and Lots of Questions

- Why are you getting divorced?
- Why can't you just stay together?
- Don't you love each other anymore?
- It's not fair!
- Did I do something wrong?
- Is this my fault? Can I make it better?
- Where am I going to live?
- Do we have to move?
- What am I going to tell my friends?
- Is there a chance that you will get back together?
- Are we going to be poor?

You know your children best. Here are some suggestions that come from parents and experts in the field. Think about whether these suggestions make sense in your situation:

- Think in advance about a good time and place to talk to your children. Choose a place where your children will feel comfortable. It's a good idea to have subsequent conversations with each child alone, especially if there is a significant age difference between them. Their abilities to understand the situation and their reactions to the news will be quite different.
- Keep in mind that most children would benefit from several shorter talks, rather than receiving all of the information at once.
- If appropriate to the situation (for example, if the level of conflict is not out of hand), it's best for both of you to be together to tell your

children. This will reassure them that they are not being abandoned and that you will cooperate in their future. But if there's too much conflict between parents, it's best for only one parent to explain what's going on.

- Avoid waiting until the last moment. Contrary to popular belief, delay will not protect children from anxiety. In fact, when the children are aware of the difficulties between their parents, delay will only increase their anxiety. However, when parents need to remain under one roof while separating, it makes sense to delay sharing the news until the physical separation is approaching.
- Tell children, in general terms, why the separation is taking place. Remember to think about their age and stage of development. Children need to know that separation and divorce is not their fault, but your decision.
- Plan what to say ahead of time. (See box ***Communicating Effectively with Children, Preteens and Teenagers.***) Above all else, be genuine. Depending on the circumstances, here are some messages that may be useful:
    - *"We could not find a way to work out our problems or to make things any better. We've made mistakes and we're sorry that we're causing you pain."*
    - *"Separation is a grown-up issue and you are not to blame. It is our problem and we will work it out."*
    - *"We know it seems unfair that these problems cause you pain and unhappiness. We wish things were different, too, but we all have to work at accepting the changes in our family."*
    - *"We won't be living together any more, but we both love you no matter where either of us lives."*
    - *"You will always be part of a family."*
    - *"We want you to say what you feel and think. It's normal to have lots of feelings. We understand because adults have these same feelings too."*

GIVE YOUR CHILDREN A VOICE

Give your children lots of opportunities to ask questions and share their thoughts and feelings, and let them provide input on the decision-making process, when possible. (See box ***Looking Through the Eyes of a Young Person.***) Let them know that, while you are the adults making the final decision, their needs and thoughts matter. Because younger children may be afraid to ask questions or don't yet have enough experience to express their ideas, you may want to raise some questions that may be on their minds. If they are quiet during the discussion, remember that children need time to process information. Let them know that you are willing to talk about things as often as they need or want to.

Looking Through the Eyes of a Young Person

In studies that interviewed college students whose parents had separated when they were young, the vast majority of them wished their parents had spent more time talking with them about the separation and encouraged them to ask questions and provide input.

Some children will have suspected or seen that things are not going well in their parents' relationship. For others, it will come as a complete shock. Children need time to adjust. Although some children may feel relieved that things are finally out in the open, they will still feel vulnerable and insecure. At first, children of all ages may not be able to imagine life without both parents under the same roof, no matter how difficult family life may have been. Parents need to be patient and gentle with an unhappy child.

With preschoolers and younger children, be as clear and specific as possible about timelines and living arrangements. When are the changes going to take place? Where are they going to live? How and when will they be with both parents? Who will take care of the family pets? Think about what you were doing and thinking about when you were a young child, and what would be on your mind after hearing the news?

Teenagers have the advantage of a growing maturity and understanding of human relationships. However, this greater understanding makes them aware of how life will change, from housing to disruptions in their school and social life. Therefore, preteens and teenagers will worry about how the divorce will affect them—both now and in the future. You can help by encouraging them to talk about their feelings, express disappointment and fears, and give them some say in how to deal with changes likely to occur. Help them to find solutions with you. (See box ***Communicating Effectively with Children, Preteens and Teenagers.***)

You may be surprised by how much grief your children experience after hearing news of the separation, especially if you believe the decision was a good one for you. In some cases, a child's grief is quite profound. This can be very difficult and upsetting to deal with. Being a loving parent means that there are times when you may feel guilt. However, it's important not to let yourself think "I should have done more." As a parent, it's natural to always want to do the best for your children, but feelings of guilt are not in your best interests or those of your children. Guilt may add to an already deep sense of personal loss and sadness, and may provoke self-destructive thoughts. Feelings of guilt or anger can also cause us to become defensive, withdraw or blame others.

Communicating Effectively with Children, Preteens and Teenagers

Communicating with your children is how you build their trust and sense of security, and assure them that their needs will be taken care of. These suggestions may help you communicate more effectively with your children.

Look for cues and clues. "Communication" is not the same thing for children as it is for adults. Children don't have the emotional and intellectual maturity to express themselves through words alone. Often, younger children communicate their innermost thoughts through playing, drawing and writing. For some children, their cues and clues will be more obvious and hard to ignore—such as outbursts, tantrums or withdrawal. By being attentive, you will learn to recognize and understand the meaning of your children's activities, facial expressions and body language.

Become a good listener. "Active listening" is a skill that you can learn to help communicate effectively—with adults, with teens, and with younger children. For example, by paraphrasing (gently repeating your child's statement in slightly different words), you can reassure children that they are being heard and understood. Active listening can also help children put a name to their feelings. As you are paraphrasing your child's statements, you can "label" the feelings the child is expressing, for example, "It sounds like you feel frustrated/you are angry/you are scared."

Build their understanding over time. Children can grasp more and more about a situation as they get older and develop more intellectual skills. Provide opportunities to go back to topics and talk about them again.

Give children and teenagers a say in their lives. You need to be in charge, not your children—but good parenting involves listening to your children and allowing them to add their input into the decision-making process, as appropriate. As much as possible, encourage your children to express their needs and opinions, and to be part of family decisions such as recreational activities, vacations, special occasions and clothes. Clearly, there is a big distinction between giving children choice in day-to-day activities, and putting them in a position where they are responsible for making adult decisions. But children need to know that their voice will be heard when adult decisions are made about issues that affect their lives.

Practise indirect communication with younger children. Indirect communication is a creative tool to help parents communicate with children. Many parents instinctively use indirect communication when explaining complex or confusing ideas to their children. You can use books, storytelling, hand puppets, dolls, action figures and drawings to help children talk about or act out their feelings. The type of indirect communication you choose will vary according to your own comfort level and your child's age and interests.

You can use indirect communication by telling your child a story about imaginary children in the same circumstances. The more these stories include the child's specific worries and fears, the more effective they will be. For example, you may tell the story of a child who feels sad because he can no longer kiss both

Mommy and Daddy goodnight. By asking "How do you think the little boy in the story feels?," the child has the opportunity to talk about his or her own feelings. This technique is particularly effective for parents and children who have trouble expressing their feelings.

Indirect communication can help you to:

- give your children an opportunity to explore their feelings, without them worrying that you might be angry or disappointed
- help children realize that others face the same situations
- gain insight into your children's thoughts
- strengthen feelings of closeness and understanding between you and your children
- give your children some examples of healthy coping strategies

Practise direct communication with preteens and teenagers. Preteens and teenagers want to be respected for their growing maturity and viewpoints. When older children are spoken to as though they are young children, they are likely to feel insulted. It is usually best to be direct with preteens and teenagers, and avoid giving lectures or disguising the point. But remember, you know your own children better than anyone. Trust yourself.

Preteens and teenagers want to have a say about the things they see as important. Although communication is not always easy with teenagers, you can let them know that you value their input and want to listen to what they have to say.

Teenagers' developmental urge for independence and the need to be their own person create many opportunities for arguments. Some parents find it helpful to choose issues of

disagreement very carefully. For example, what a teen chooses to wear to school is not an issue, but safe driving practices are not negotiable. Remember, teenagers continue to need firm limits and consequences for their actions.

A direct style of communication, however, should not be confused with involving children in adult problems. Although your preteens or teenagers may even try to be your friend or counsellor, avoid placing them in those roles. Share your needs and fears about the separation with other adults.

Section 4

PROTECTING CHILDREN FROM CONFLICT

One of the best things you can do for your children to protect them from the negative consequences of parental separation and to help them thrive is likely to be one of the most difficult—reducing conflict with your ex–partner. (See box ***Understanding Conflict.***)

IMPACT OF PARENTAL CONFLICT ON CHILDREN

Children are very vulnerable to their parents' anger, either directed toward them or against each another. When parents fight openly, their children suffer the consequences. There is nothing more distressing for them than to be caught in-between angry parents.

A high degree of conflict very often results in difficulties for children, and these problems may last a lifetime. A large body of research reveals that children's lives—and their relationships with their parents—are affected by how their parents handle conflict. The aspects of conflict linked to the greatest difficulties for children include:

- seeing or overhearing their parents' aggressive or violent conflict, whether verbal or physical
- feeling guilt and responsibility for parents' problems or their well-being because of a conflict they are having with a parent
- hearing one parent speak negatively about the other parent or criticize that parent's character or mistakes

- being caught in loyalty conflicts that require them to directly or indirectly side with one parent and against the other
- being used as a messenger to carry hostile messages or convey a parent's anger
- being forbidden to mention one parent in the presence of the other or to have photos or momentos of the other parent

Children learn what they live. If they see their parents treating each other poorly or yelling at each other, they learn that these are acceptable behaviours and become more likely to engage in them.

You may be involved in a bitter break-up, exhausted and infuriated. Or you may feel like you just want a clean break from your ex-partner. This is understandable, but the bottom line is that your children need both of you in their lives.

At all costs, avoid venting about your adult problems with your children. Friends, counsellors, therapists, and even a pet can all make good listeners when you need to get negative feelings off your chest.

Understanding Conflict

What Is Conflict?		Ask Yourself ...
A conflict is more than just a disagreement.	It is an ongoing situation in which one or both parties perceive a threat (whether or not the threat is real).	What were the main conflicts in your relationship? Are they the same or different issues after the separation?
Conflicts continue to fester when ignored.	Because conflicts involve perceived threats to our well-being or survival, they stay with us until we face and resolve them.	Do you fear conflict or avoid it at all costs? Do you have conflicts with your ex-partner or anyone else that never get addressed?
We respond to conflicts based on our interpretations of events.	We do not always respond to an objective review of the facts. Our interpretations are influenced by our life experiences, culture, values and beliefs.	What is the story you tell yourself and others about why the relationship ended? What story might your ex-partner tell about how the relationship ended? Is there some truth to both stories?
Conflicts trigger strong emotions.	If we aren't comfortable with our emotions or able to manage them in times of stress, we won't be able to resolve conflict successfully. Viewing a conflict as hopeless could create a self-fulfilling prophesy.	Do you view conflict with your ex-partner as demoralizing, humiliating, or something to fear? Do you expect discussions with your ex-partner to go badly?
Conflicts are an opportunity for growth.	When you are able to resolve conflict in a relationship, it builds confidence and trust.	Do you think you might be able to let go of some of the resentment and anger you hold for your ex-partner, for the sake of the children?

It's natural to feel hurt and angry, but your feelings don't have to rule your behaviour. (See "***Learning to Let Go of Anger***" in Section 2.) Fortunately, there are proven strategies that you can practise and apply that reduce anger and improve your mental well-being.

SOME TIPS TO HELP YOU REDUCE CONFLICT WITH YOUR EX-PARTNER

- **Focus on the goal—stay child-focused.** Take a few moments to change your mindset from what's happened in the past to what your children need in the present. Think about what you want to accomplish and how that will make a difference for your children. State the problem without blame, describe how you think it is affecting the children, and be open to finding a solution that works for both of you. (See box ***Differences Between a Hard and a Soft Start-Up.***)
- **Give yourself a short "time-out."** Schedule some personal time to relax at a stressful time of day or around a stressful situation.
- **Consider the timing.** If you and your ex-partner tend to argue at a particular time of day or night, try changing the time of these co-parenting discussions.
- **Avoid what you can avoid.** If it just isn't possible to relate to your ex-partner without constant conflict, there are ways to co-parent that minimize contact with the other person. (For more information, see "***When Cooperative Co-Parenting Seems Impossible—Parallel Parenting***" in Section 6.)
- **Use a "soft start-up" when bringing up areas of conflict or disagreement.** The use of a soft start-up at the beginning of a disagreement could help influence a positive outcome. Research reveals that discussions generally end on the same note they begin.[3]

[3] The concept of "soften your start-up" was developed by **John Gottman**, a psychologist known for his books on relationships, marriage and parenting. His numerous books include the titles: *What Makes Love Last; The Relationship Cure; Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work;* and *Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child.*

In other words, if you start an argument harshly—meaning you attack or blame your ex-partner verbally—you'll most likely end the argument with at least as much tension as you began. But if you use a softened start-up—meaning you raise the issue without criticizing—you have a much better chance at reaching an agreement. Here are some examples of the difference between a harsh and a soft start-up:

Differences Between a Hard and a Soft Start-Up

	A Hard Start-Up	A Soft Start-Up
Raise the issue without blame.	"It's your fault that Allison's homework was turned in late last week."	"Allison's homework was turned in late last week. I'm upset about this, because she needs us to help her stay on track in school."
Make statements that start with "I" and not "You."	"You are not listening to me."	"I think it could be helpful if we tried listening to each other better, for the sake of our children."
Describe what is happening without judgment.	"You never fix the kids a healthy breakfast." "John is never free when I am scheduled to call him."	"I think the kids do better at school if they start their day with a healthy breakfast." "I really find it helpful to touch base with John when he is at your house. How can we work to ensure that I call at a time when John is free to chat?"
Be clear.	"You need to pay more attention to the children in the evenings before they go to bed."	"The children respond well to a pre-bedtime routine. Joey calms down for sleep when I read two storybooks to him before bed. Suzy needs to take a bath, even though she doesn't always want to take one. She likes her special soap and bath toys."
Be appreciative.	"The children enjoyed the trip to the zoo."	"Thank you for taking the kids to the zoo for the day." I know they had a great time."

UNDERSTANDING ANGER

We all feel angry at times. Anger is part of our human experience. Anger by itself is not destructive, but how we try to cope with it can be. For example, if we handle and express our anger inappropriately, we can end up doing harm to ourselves and others.

Anger is the emotional response that we have to an event perceived as a threat, a violation or an injustice. The experience of anger varies from person to person. For example, someone may cry when they feel angry while someone else may yell, while still someone else may become withdrawn.

We usually learn to experience and deal with anger as we grow up. For example, in some families angry outbursts were tolerated while others avoided expressing any feelings—positive or negative. Still others encouraged the expression of feelings and taught children to deal with their anger in healthy ways and to stand up for themselves in a firm, but respectful way.

When we feel anger, it's time to pay attention to the reasons behind the anger. The experience of anger has some common elements:

- We experience what is happening as **unfair**
- We feel **helpless** in the moment, or maybe:
  - threatened and fearful
  - vulnerable
  - exposed, shamed or violated
  - unable to meet our needs
- We personalize the experience:
  - "it's been done to me"
  - "it's happening to me"

There are four basic ways in which people respond to anger:

- Aggressive: Anger is "turned loose"
- Passive: Anger is "locked up" inside
- Passive/Aggressive: Outwardly agreeable, but channels the anger indirectly
- Assertive: Anger is appropriately managed and communicated if necessary

SKILLFUL HANDLING OF ANGER

It may appear, at face value, that holding anger in rather than letting it out is a better option. But denying our anger can be very harmful. Because unresolved anger can leave us in a state of perpetual arousal, or make us feel chronically helpless, it's damaging to our bodies, our relationships and our own mental well-being.

If you tend to hold in your anger, first recognize that this is your way of coping with the anger. Next, try to get it out by writing your thoughts and feelings on paper or on a computer. Then try to talk with a trusted friend or a counsellor about the anger you are holding inside. There are ways to express negative thoughts and feelings in a healthy and respectful way. Allow yourself to be angry. If you feel you need to confront someone, stand up for yourself in a firm, but respectful way. Do it at a time when you are calm and in a way that protects the other person's feelings. Respond rather than react. (See box ***Preventing Impulsive Decisions or Actions: The "24-Hour Rule."***)

Preventing Impulsive Decisions or Actions: The "24-Hour Rule"

Our reactions to various life situations do not always reflect who we want to be or what we really want. For example, think about the times you've regretted decisions that you made or actions that you did in the heat of the moment. Like a lot of people, in hindsight you probably wish you could take them back. When we experience anger, we are more likely to make poor decisions and act impulsively if we don't take the time to calm down and gain perspective. That's where the "24-hour rule" comes in.

The 24-hour rule is a simple and effective decision-making tool that prevents us from overreacting or making instant regrettable decisions. In a nutshell, the 24-hour rule has only one requirement: to wait 24 hours after an upsetting incident—perhaps with your ex-partner or teenager—before reacting. The 24-hour rule can help stop us in our tracks and remind us to calm down. We can even say something like "I am so angry with you, but I'm going to wait a day before deciding what to say or do." The passage of just 24 hours allows us to look at the situation with a fresh perspective, without feeling like we are being controlled by immediate, strong emotions. With some distance, our judgment is in charge, not our anger.

You can apply the 24-hour rule when you find yourself in difficult situations with your ex-partner, your children or anybody else.

Just as turning anger inward is unhelpful and damaging, so too is unleashing the anger inappropriately. In the short-run, acting out our anger in destructive or inappropriate ways may seem to help us feel better, but rash behaviour tends to make things worse. If we make a habit of acting out our anger, we put ourselves at its mercy, letting it control our lives and reinforcing our fears, feelings of vulnerability and guilt. (See ***"Learning to Let Go of Anger"*** in Section 2.)

IDENTIFY NEGATIVE THOUGHT PATTERNS THAT TRIGGER YOUR ANGER

Common negative thinking patterns can also trigger and fuel anger. The key is to bring them to your awareness. These common negative thinking patterns, unrestrained, are likely to make life more difficult for you and your children:

- **Overgeneralizing.** For example, "You always interrupt me" ... "You never consider my needs" ... "You are always late delivering the children."
- **Obsessing on "shoulds" and "musts."** Having a rigid view of the way things should or must be and getting angry when things don't line up.
- **Mind-reading and jumping to conclusions.** Assuming that you "know" what your ex-partner is thinking or feeling, for example, he or she has intentionally upset you, ignored your wishes or disrespected you.
- **Collecting straws.** Looking for things to get upset about, usually while overlooking anything positive. Or letting small irritations build and build until you reach the "final straw" and explode, often over something relatively minor.

- **Blaming.** When anything bad happens or something goes wrong, it's always the fault of your ex-partner.
- **Losing perspective.** Blowing the situation or problem out of proportion when compared with the bigger picture.

Most of us, at one time or another, engage in these negative thinking patterns. But if they become ingrained in your way of relating or responding to your ex-partner, your co-parenting relationship—and thus your children—will likely suffer. Take a moment to see if you can relate to any of these forms of negative thinking patterns. With awareness, you can change these patterns.

The bottom line is that, whatever it takes or whatever works to help you co-parent with your ex-partner, do it for your children. Over time, you may begin to see the positive benefits in your own well-being, too.

Section 5

PARENTING PRACTICES: RAISING RESILIENT CHILDREN

Some say parenting is the most important job in the world. Others say that it is the hardest job in the world. Still others say that parenting is the most rewarding job on earth. Whether the superlative "the most" is accurate or not, most everyone would agree that parenting is an important role that is both difficult and rewarding.

Nowadays, parents are bombarded with information, whether in the form of books, articles, television programming or online. Parenting advice can be found virtually everywhere you turn. Whom to trust? Where to turn?

Parenting isn't about being perfect or even trying to be perfect. It's more about using your inner wisdom and common sense. Anyway, there is no one approach to parenting, because all children and families are unique.

Although there is a lot of conflicting parenting advice out there, decades of research on the topic have provided some helpful insights on which parenting practices—in general—improve children's resilience and ability to succeed in school and in life. (See box ***What Is Resilience?***) This section provides information and tips on some of these evidence-based parenting approaches and behaviours. You know your children best. If you find some suggestions that you think might be helpful, you may want to try conducting your own "home experiment" to see if you notice positive changes in your children.

What Is Resilience?

Life presents us with countless challenges, setbacks and general difficulties. “Resilience” is the ability to “bounce back” from the ongoing demands and challenges of life and to learn from them in a positive way.

We are all born with the capacity to be resilient. We develop resilience throughout our lifetimes by learning to understand and manage our impulses and emotions—particularly when under stress. Parents play a substantial role in helping children develop their resilience. Children learn a lot by watching their parents. When parents cope well with everyday stress, they are showing their children how to do the same.

Inner strengths and supportive environments are both essential to build resilience.

Inner strengths include:

- awareness and self-control
- thinking and problem-solving skills
- confidence and courage
- positive outlook
- responsibility and participation

Outside supports include:

- caring relationships
- positive role models in families and communities
- community resources such as schools, community centres, programs for parents and children, and faith groups.

The information and suggestions contained in this resource are designed to help parents develop their children's resilience as well as their own.

GOOD PARENTING PROTECTS CHILDREN FROM RISK

It's common sense, but scientific evidence demonstrates that the quality of the relationship between a parent and child is one of the most powerful factors in a child's development and growth. The emotional connection between parent and child creates the conditions for a child to grow up feeling safe, secure, loved and understood.

In fact, among children who underwent a stressful life circumstance (such as their parents' separation or the death of a close relative), the children who did better had at least two things in common:

- They had a close and meaningful relationship with at least one parent.
- The parenting they received was consistent and nurturing.

The good news for parents is that studies have confirmed that parents can apply practices that improve their children's ability to succeed in life. (See box ***Get Connected with Your Provincial Resources.***) Some are very simple and easy approaches that you can incorporate into your day, while others involve maintaining a consistent approach to parenting and disciplining.

Get Connected with Your Provincial Resources

All provinces and territories offer parenting information sessions for separating parents and some are available online. Parenting programs for separating parents address a full-range of topics, including children's needs at different ages, legal and financial issues, parenting skills, and methods to help reduce conflict. In some provinces, these parenting classes are mandatory if there is a court proceeding.

Your first step is to check out your provincial or territorial list of services and resources available for separating parents. Some jurisdictions have excellent websites containing videos and online learning opportunities, and publish parenting after separation guides as well as age-appropriate resources for children.

(See Section 11—***Resources for how to connect with your provincial or territorial Family Justice services.***)

WARM, ENTHUSIASTIC AND FIRM

Over the years, researchers have studied the kinds of parenting styles and practices that help children mature and thrive. The most effective style of parenting is one that is often referred to as **"authoritative parenting."** (See box ***A Checklist for Authoritative Parenting.***)

Authoritative parents tend to be nurturing and responsive, set high standards and show respect for children as independent beings. The authoritative parent expects maturity and cooperation, while offering children lots of emotional support.

Although authoritative parents are nurturing, responsive and involved, they don't let their children get away with bad behaviour. Authoritative parents show high levels of warmth and emphasize the reasons for the rules. (See ***"Use Discipline to Teach"***.)

A Checklist for Authoritative Parenting

- ✓ I listen to my children.
- ✓ I encourage their curiosity and independence.
- ✓ I place limits, consequences and expectations on my children's behaviour.
- ✓ I express warmth and nurturance.
- ✓ I encourage my children to express their feelings and I help them when they are feeling scared or upset.
- ✓ I try to be enthusiastic about what they are enthusiastic about.
- ✓ I allow my children to express opinions, even if they are different from my own.
- ✓ I encourage my children to discuss options.
- ✓ I explain the meaning behind the rules.
- ✓ My discipline is fair and consistent and focuses on growth and maturity, not punishment.

Children who grow up with parents who practise an authoritative style of parenting tend to:

- have a happier disposition
- be able to manage their emotions
- develop good social skills
- be self-confident about their abilities to learn new skills

MATCH YOUR EXPECTATIONS TO YOUR CHILD'S TEMPERAMENT

Any parent with more than one child knows that from a very young age a child's "personal style" can be clearly defined. Even among siblings, children can and do have different likes and dislikes, levels of activity, reactions to stimuli, and any number of other traits that make them unique individuals. Putting it another way, in the same situation, one child may be shy and the other bold; one may be calm, while the other is feisty. "Temperament" is the word used to describe this inborn quality that a child brings into the world. (See box ***What Is "Temperament"?*** in Section 7.)

Understanding a young child's temperament is not meant to label a child but to help parents and caregivers appreciate the differences among children and provide the best environment for each unique child to thrive. Why? Because children do better when their parents guide them in ways that respect their individual differences and help affirm their unique sense of self. Conversely, children whose parents are not attuned to their unique temperament may experience more stress and frustration. Here are some examples:

- If parents know that their child is slow to warm up to new people or places, they can allow more time for the child to adjust. Parents may have to encourage such a child to try new experiences by encouraging

rather than pressuring, thus helping the child grow and develop at his or her own pace. Particularly during transitions from one home to another, the point is to go slowly, take extra time, encourage, be gentle and be patient.

- If parents know that their child has a high activity level, they will not expect the child to sit in a car for a long time. This child needs plenty of opportunities to run around and get physical. The point is to view the high activity level as a positive and provide lots of physical outlets for such a child.

In addition, young children with different temperaments can react differently when faced with conflict or differences of opinion:

- Anger is some children's first response to a disagreement—they may need their parents help to learn how to cool down and manage their frustration. *"Let's play the 'deep breathing game' together and then talk about it."*
- Some children get bossy and may treat others unkindly—parents can help by nurturing their empathy and sense of fairness. *"I wonder how your sister feels when you call her dumb? How would you feel if others called you dumb?"*
- Some children are uncomfortable with conflict, running away from it because they don't want to upset anyone—parents can help them learn to speak up and ask for what they need or want. *"It's your time to play with the new toy, so let the other kids know that they can play when you are done. It's your time now."*

The best gift a parent can give children is to accept them for who they are. In practical terms that means matching your expectations to what your child is capable of doing. If your child is outgoing, expecting your child to be able to sit quietly for a period of time is setting the child up for failure. If your child is shy, pushing her into social situations will most certainly backfire. Over time and with appropriate guidance, young children's temperaments will adapt and change.

ATTEND TO YOUR CHILDREN'S SENSE OF IDENTITY AND BELONGING

From the time they are born, children and youth develop a sense of identity and belonging through their relationships with their parents and family, peers, neighbourhood and community. A positive sense of identity and belonging is fundamental to our emotional maturity and ability to get along with others. Without it, we are lost. When children have positive experiences with their parents and relatives—as a result of growing up feeling loved, respected and valued—they develop a sense of inner security and resilience.

Parental conflict and separation as well as family reorganization can disrupt a child's inner and outer worlds. Their sense of self and belonging, previously aligned with both parents, has been shaken. Especially when changes happen quickly, children may experience confusion, sadness and insecurity. Knowing this, parents can help support their children's sense of identity during the changes and transitions.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

For infants and young toddlers, you can support their emerging sense of identity and belonging by:

- providing a warm, nurturing environment in which their physical and emotional needs are reliably met
- holding, snuggling and providing continuous physical affection
- talking with them in soothing tones about how much they are loved
- delighting in their new skills, from learning to touch their toes to saying their first word

For young children, you can support their emerging sense of identity and belonging by:

- ensuring the active involvement of both parents in their lives
- respecting and encouraging each child's unique personality, interests and preferences
- providing opportunities to play and interact with relatives and peers
- telling interesting stories about their grandparents and ancestors
- taking time to introduce new adult partners into their lives

For children in late preschool and early school years, you can support their sense of identify and belonging by:

- encouraging them to explore and develop their interests and abilities
- helping them to feel secure and proud of their unique personality and interests
- getting to know them better by asking questions and sharing their interests
- looking at photos of relatives and sharing funny stories that highlight their unique personalities and talents

For school-aged children and preteens, you can support their sense of identity and belonging by:

- providing as much stability and acceptance at home as possible
- encouraging open communication about school, friendships and anything else
- storytelling about their family history
- staying connected with their school activities and other interests
- monitoring their social activities—making sure you can always contact one another

For adolescents, you can support their sense of identity and belonging by:

- demonstrating how your own beliefs and values shape your decisions and actions (walk the talk!)—in other words, you treat your children as you would want to be treated
- encouraging them to share their opinions on news stories and politics
- helping them find mentors who share their interests or have made a difference in the world

(See also Section 7—***Helping Children at Every Age.***)

ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE AND EMPATHIZE

All of us have a yearning to be understood by others. Think of a recent time at work or with your ex-partner or friend when you felt misunderstood. Or perhaps a time from your childhood when you felt misunderstood or were told that you shouldn't feel a certain way? Most likely, you felt frustrated, hurt or angry. It's the same thing with children, but because of their limited vocabulary or maturity, they are more likely to be misunderstood.

When your children are upset or misbehaving, try to empathize with their distress. Just being understood helps humans let go of troubling emotions. If your child's upset seems out of proportion to the situation, remember that we all store up emotions and then let ourselves vent once we find a safe haven. Then we are free to move on.

When children misbehave, there is usually a reason. They may be tired, frustrated, hungry, seeking attention or feeling misunderstood. If you can figure out what is causing the misbehaviour, you will have more success responding to the misbehaviour and perhaps preventing it in

the future. If you have some clues, let children know that you are trying to understand why they aren't behaving:

"It's hard for you to stop playing and come to dinner, but it's time now."

"You wish you could have me all to yourself, don't you."

"You want to stay up later with the big kids, I know. But remember how hard it was for you to get up in the morning when you stayed up late?"

"You're upset that we need to leave the park so I can start dinner."

Emphasizing doesn't mean you agree, just that you see it from your child's perspective. We all know how good it feels to have our perspective acknowledged. When our thoughts and feelings have been validated, somehow that makes it easier when we don't get our way. Try it with your younger children, and see if this approach works.

SPEND SOME SPECIAL TIME WITH EACH CHILD

With a crowded schedule, filled with work, meals, chores and children's activities, it can be difficult to imagine carving out some time alone with each child. But even a couple of spontaneous moments each day with each child will go a long way in strengthening your bond, building your child's confidence, increasing your child's ability to adapt to the changes and even reducing behaviour problems. You can alternate between doing what your child wants to do and what you want to do. This special time is a great opportunity for you to be fully present with your child—observing, listening, interacting, and appreciating. Slowing down and taking these few moments to be alone with each child will reap huge benefits. Try it for a month and see if you notice a change, not only in your child but in yourself!

ENCOURAGE PLAY AND RECREATION

At whatever age, play is essential for children's development. In fact it's been said that "play is the work of childhood." Science supports many of our intuitions about the importance of play. Playful behaviour appears to have positive effects on a child's ability to learn. There are all kinds of play—physical outdoor play, make-believe play, using toys and games, playing alone, with other children or with adults.

During times of stress and change, children need play more than ever. Physical play can help them work off steam, make-believe play can help them work out anxieties about their parents' separation, toys give them pleasure and help them learn, and playing with you strengthens your bonds. So even though—and maybe especially so—you all are going through a difficult transition, look at play as therapeutic rather than superficial or selfish.

Older children need plenty of opportunities to play with their friends. Organized sports are a great way for older children to get physical, learn to get along with others, and make new friends. Also encourage children to put down the computer or phone and spend time doing fun art, science and other activities with their friends.

FOCUS ON EFFORT

"Wow! I love how you are trying so hard to get the puzzle pieces to fit."

"I'm impressed with how you are trying to figure out your math homework. Keep at it, and let me know if you get stuck with one problem."

"Look at how much better you are on the piano than you were last week. I can tell how much you've been practising!"

As much as possible, encourage effort rather than praising results. Instead of praising children for a job well done, encourage children for their effort and perseverance—even if there isn't a successful outcome. Encouragement celebrates a child's improvements, motivates children to apply themselves even when the task is difficult, and teaches independence. When they get stuck, encourage them to ask you, a teacher or a sibling for help. The key is to encourage children in a way that makes them feel appreciated and recognized. In this way, children develop a deep sense of belonging and appreciation for learning from mistakes. Researchers have discovered that children do better in school when they believe that they can learn something new or improve in a skill by simply applying themselves or trying harder.

Some children have a lower tolerance for frustration than others. For example, these children may cry or get angry when they can't finish a puzzle or get up and leave if they are not winning at a game. Children with a low tolerance for frustration need extra support and encouragement to keep trying. Encourage the child to try different ways to make something work or to ask you or another adult for help. Keep reminding the child that trying is more important than achieving and that with practice and patience, things will get easier to figure out. (See box ***What Parents Can Do to Help Children at Every Age.***)

What Parents Can Do to Help Children at Every Age

- Children need to know how much they are loved by their parents. Be demonstrative—show your affection in words and actions.
- Create an environment where children are protected from conflict (for example, avoid arguing in front of them).
- Avoid involving children in adult problems.
- Allow your children to express their feelings and listen to their point of view on decisions that affect them.
- Play with children. At all stages of development, playing alone, with adults and with friends helps children develop emotional, intellectual and social abilities.
- Avoid speaking of the other parent in negative terms. Children should feel free to love both of their parents, without having to choose sides or feel they are betraying one parent.
- Spend some time alone with each child, even if it's just for a few minutes.
- Maintain as much routine and continuity as possible.
- Make sure children have opportunities to visit with relatives and spend time with friends.
- Stay in touch with child care providers and teachers. Most of them will appreciate your input and involvement, and will be happy to share their insights and ideas. They are also good sources of information on child development and community resources.

- Set reasonable rules and limits for your children's behaviour according to their stage of development.
- If you make promises to your children, keep them.
- Take care of yourself. Your children are depending on you.
- Above all, if your child is experiencing problems, reach out for professional help—sooner rather than later—through the school or your family doctor.

MAINTAIN YOUR CHILD'S COMMUNITY OF SUPPORT

A child's community of support provides a place of belonging. This community includes family, daycare, school and friends—the people and places they come into contact with and influence them almost every day in their young lives. Preteens and teenagers, in particular, need regular contact with their friends, from talking on the phone to spending time together at school and participating in social activities.

Grandparents and other members of the extended family are very important for children, especially if they have already established a close relationship. (See box ***What Grandparents—and Close Relatives and Friends—Can Do.***) If they don't openly take the side of either parent, relatives can provide emotional security and be an important influence on children. Grandparents, aunts and uncles can help children by keeping in touch, spending time alone with them and assuring them that the divorce is not their fault. Teachers and caregivers should be informed if there is a separation or a change of address. It is particularly important to let teachers and caregivers know who will be picking up the children and when, and who to call in case of a problem or emergency.

Teachers and child care providers are especially significant since they spend so much time with your children. They can help provide a stable environment and a consistent routine. They can also help your children understand that they are not alone and that other children also experience separation and divorce. Good communication between teachers, caregivers and parents can help children adjust to the changes that divorce brings to their lives. They can play an important role by talking to you about any changes in your child's behaviour. Often, children do not express feelings directly, but teachers may notice signs of distress.

What Grandparents—and Close Relatives and Friends—Can Do

- Keep in mind the evidence from numerous studies: Children do far better when they have a meaningful relationship with both parents. The best thing you can do for your grandchildren is to put aside your feelings or loyalties and support their relationship with both parents.
- Be a good listener. If your grandchildren are surrounded by turmoil or angry adults, you may be one of the few places where they feel safe to be themselves and open up. You can become that trusted person who is not judgmental or opinionated. A special relationship with a grandparent can make all the difference to a child facing change.
- Let your grandchildren know that however they are feeling it is okay. Some children are told that they “shouldn’t” feel a particular way, sometimes because the adults in their lives feel guilty for causing them pain and disruption. But this only adds to a child’s sense of being alone or misunderstood. And remember that it is perfectly natural for children to want their

parents to get back together. Allow them to express their fears and desires, without giving them false information or hope.

- It is important not to interfere with the agreements set up by either parent. For example, if one parent has set up arrangements for a play date for their children, work your schedule with the children around these plans. Or if the children are expected to finish their homework before they can go out to play, try not to give in because you feel sorry for their situation. Especially during their parents' separation, children need structure and routine to help them adapt to the changes.
- Tell your grandchildren stories about challenges you have faced and overcome in your life. Help them see you as someone who believes things will be all right and that they are safe. Focusing on how you overcame challenges will help build resilience in your grandchildren.
- Help your grandchildren find ways to soothe themselves when they are sad or scared. Share with them what you do to take care of yourself when you are feeling unhappy or overwhelmed. If you are refreshed by a walk in nature, take them for a walk in the woods or in a park. Ask your grandchildren what they like to do for fun or what helps them when they are unhappy. Add those activities in their future visits with you.
- Read together during a quiet time before they go to bed or between activities. Reading stories about feelings or how other children have adapted to divorce can help your grandchildren find words to talk about their experience and ask you and other adults for help when they need it.

- Be flexible, but consistent, with family holidays. An important role of a grandparent is to celebrate and help create memories. These celebrations may look different or require more organization and planning than before the separation, but if you keep the grandchildren's interests first, you can help create memorable and wonderful family traditions. Even a home-baked box of cookies mailed at certain times of the year can become a cherished childhood memory that lets children know that they are always loved.
- Don't talk negatively about your ex-son or daughter-in-law in front of your grandchildren. Vent your feelings with other adults in your life when your grandchildren are not around. Otherwise, you are simply adding to your grandchildren's confusion and distress. The overriding guideline in separation or divorce agreements involving children is to make decisions or act in ways that are "in the best interests of the child"—not of the adults.

USE DISCIPLINE TO TEACH

When you were a child, would you say that the household rules were fair, or strict, or lax, or maybe inconsistent?

Were you at a school or a job where there were lots of rules, and many of them didn't make sense?

Have you ever felt shamed or humiliated when you were called out for something you did at school or work?

Can you think of a rule at your childhood home that kept you safe and perhaps even alive?

Your children need you to help them understand what kind of behaviours you expect from them and what rules you expect them to follow. As they mature, they need to understand why the rules are important for their own safety and growth. They also need help from you to manage their feelings, understand responsibility and take charge of their behaviours. Finally, your children need to know the consequences for breaking the rules.

Consequences should give a child the chance to be heard and forgiven. A consequence is more effective than pain, fear, shame, humiliation or punishment. Parents can decide to respond with a logical consequence or a natural one. An example of a logical consequence: The child must help clean off the crayon marks she made on the wall. An example of a natural consequence: If a child refuses to eat dinner, he will be hungry later on.

Other kinds of strategies you can consider:

- Take away a privilege and give the child a chore to do.
- Be very clear about what behaviours are not acceptable and why. Crossing the line will come with clear consequences. Be firm but kind.
- If something is damaged because of misbehaviour, ask the child to fix it, make a new one, or help buy a new one.
- Use a "time out," explaining that getting away for a while from a situation helps all of us calm to down and think more clearly.
- Take a stand against physical aggression and name-calling. Whenever aggression occurs, nip it in the bud: "I won't let you hit your brother and I'd never let him hit you either. Figure out another way to solve this!"

(See also Section 7—***Helping Children at Every Age.***)

Catch your children being good. Children hear the word "no" a lot, partly because they ask for a lot of things and they naturally try to push limits. But it can be pretty demoralizing to hear "no" all the time. So take the time to notice when your child is being good and call it out: "You picked up your clothes without being asked—that's terrific!" Or, "I was watching you play with your baby brother and you were really patient—that was really nice of you!"

Make a point of finding some good behaviour to praise every day. Be generous with your rewards—hugs and compliments can work wonders and focus attention on the behaviours you want to see grow.

Show that your love is unconditional. As a parent, you are responsible for correcting and guiding your children's behaviour. But how you express your corrective guidance makes all the difference in how a child receives it. When you have to confront your child, avoid blaming, criticizing or shaming—all of which can undermine a child's sense of self-worth and can lead to resentment. Shame is toxic to children's emotional development, just as swallowing poison is toxic to their physical health. Instead, strive to nurture and encourage, even when disciplining your children. Make sure they know that your love is there no matter what, even though you expect them to do better next time.

Some discipline strategies for teenagers. Around the time your child starts secondary school, you might need to adjust your understanding of the role of both parenting and discipline. When children are young, they need their parents to take care of their physical and emotional needs to survive and mature. But as children get older, they develop their own personalities and capacity to make choices and decisions. Parents can help growing children learn to make positive choices and decisions by modelling this behaviour and teaching them to manage their impulses and emotions.

The role of discipline is to provide logical consequences for breaking the rules designed to keep them safe and help them mature. By the time a child reaches the teen years, parents cannot control whether their children have chosen to take those life lessons to heart. In other words, parents can influence a child's independent development, but not control it. This is a key life lesson for parents, because when their teenagers disobey the rules, parents often think they are losing control. And a battle for control will most likely lead to fueling more arguments and rule-breaking. Therefore, try to keep in mind that it's not about controlling your teenager or losing control of your teenager, it's about providing a structure for keeping them safe and reinforcing good decision-making.

Effective discipline for teenagers focuses on setting clear and agreed limits and helping them behave within those limits. Teenagers aren't equipped with the skills they need to make all their decisions, although they certainly may think so. Even if your teenagers tell you they don't need your guidance, research shows the opposite. The limits you agree on for behaviour are an important influence on your children's successful transition into young adulthood.

Negotiation is a key part of communicating with teenagers and can help avoid problems. Negotiating with teenagers shows that you respect their ideas. It also helps them to develop their own decision-making muscles. Negotiate on the small things and hold firm on areas that keep teenagers safe and away from harm.

Be aware that older children are keenly aware of their parents' behaviour and how it does or does not conform to the rules they are made to follow. If they think you are being hypocritical, they likely will call you out on it. You are their most important role model—when you make a mistake, apologize and show how mistakes are opportunities for learning.

Teenagers sometimes test limits and break rules. One way that teenagers develop into independent adults is to test boundaries and watch how others react to their behaviour. Remain firm. As they receive feedback, teenagers learn about social expectations and what's expected of them. (For more information about the unique needs of teenagers, see Section 7, ***Helping Children at Every Age.***)

Some parents, out of frustration or because of lack of knowledge or support, let go of maintaining household rules and the consequences for breaking those rules. Nearly abdicating their parental role, the resulting lack of structure and limits will likely impair their children's emotional growth. Teenagers, in particular, need parental rules and oversight to help them stay safe and avoid risk-taking behaviours. In this situation, parents would do well to get back in the game and access professional support in order to reclaim their children's respect and trust.

TEACHING YOUR CHILDREN TO RESOLVE CONFLICT

In each developmental stage, children gradually expand their capacity to regulate their own emotions and to recognize that others have feelings and needs. It is not possible for young children to learn these skills without the guidance and coaching of adults. Helping children learn to manage their feelings and resolve conflict isn't complex, but it does take patience and a consistent approach.

First and foremost, be a good example and model how you would like your children to resolve conflict. It's one thing for children to witness fights and highly charged arguments between their parents, and quite another to witness their parents disagree about something. Some bickering and conflict between parents helps children learn that people have differing perspectives, that conflicts at home and in the playground are inevitable, and that there are positive ways to resolve disagreements.

Co-parenting provides a great opportunity for you to learn and apply conflict resolution skills that your children will witness and absorb.

Teaching children to resolve conflict boils down to a few basic principles:

- Take turns.
- Play fair.
- Use your words.
- Apologize.
- Share.
- Do a favour for someone else.

DEALING WITH YOUR CHILDREN'S ANGER

You've broken the news to the children about your plans to separate. Life as they know it is going to change and they are surprised, scared and upset. Depending on their age, children express anger through tears, tantrums and raised voices.

It's common for anger to conceal other vulnerable feelings, such as insecurity, embarrassment, or shame. And angry outbursts often reflect more than just what has happened in the immediate situation. Think of anger as like a volcano—difficult feelings like frustration or hurt can build up inside over time, with pressure building higher and higher. One little trigger can cause children to "erupt" and blow their tops, just like with adults. Here are some tips to help you help your children learn how to recognize and deal with their feelings of anger.

TIP #1: STAY CALM

Children absorb the emotional climate around them like sponges. Calm responses can help contain your child's anger just as angry responses can fuel the fire of your child's anger. If you're feeling wound up, don't forget

that a time out is useful for adults as well. Remove yourself from the situation and breathe deeply and slowly. (See ***relaxation exercise*** on page 11)

TIP #2: INCREASE EMOTIONAL AWARENESS

The more you help your child understand and express difficult emotions, the less emotions will build up and overflow into angry explosions. To be able to express emotion, children first need to be aware of their feelings. You can improve your child's "emotional literacy" by beginning to increase the amount you talk about anger and other feelings. For example:

- *That man on TV looks really mad. I wonder what he is angry about?*
- *I am feeling frustrated because I can't get a minute of quiet to myself.*
- *Your brother is "stupid?" I wonder if you might be upset because he interrupted our special time together?*

TIP #3: ACCEPT FEELINGS AND REDIRECT ANGRY ACTIONS

Remember that your children's feelings may be different from your own and that feelings are neither good nor bad. For example, dismissing difficult feelings ("hey, calm down, it's not a big deal" or "you can't be feeling upset, I just got you an ice cream cone!") is often a sure-fire way to further upset your child. Instead of being able to talk about the feelings, your child will be upset about what was upsetting in the first place, now further aggravated by feeling misunderstood. The better course of action is to:

- Identify and name the feeling that is behind your child's rage.
  - Wow, Peter, that made you really upset!
  - Kathy, I can see that you are really disappointed that we need to leave the park now.

- Show understanding by guessing at your child's wishes:
  - Peter, you'd like it if your brother asked first before playing with your toys?
  - Wouldn't it be great if we could stay longer, Kathy?

- Encourage appropriate expression of feelings or problem-solving
  - Show me how you are feeling by … using words/drawing a picture/ hitting the couch cushion/or ripping up this piece of scrap paper
  - What can we do together to help solve this problem?

TIP #4: USE CLEAR AND CONSISTENT CONSEQUENCES TO LIMIT AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOUR

Your child needs to learn that although anger is okay, aggressive behaviour is not. When your child is hitting or biting or otherwise out of control, try getting down to your child's height and use a calm, low, but firm tone, which indicates your displeasure. Tell your child that the aggressive behaviour is not allowed—and why it is not allowed. Above all, try not to shout, because this suggests that you are out of control.

If your child stops behaving aggressively, give lots of praise. If the inappropriate behaviour continues after you've given a warning, impose a clear consequence such as withdrawing a privilege.

If you are worried about your child's continuing or escalating anger over a period of a few months, it's a good idea to bring it up with your child's doctor or school counsellor. Children of any age can benefit from talk or play therapy.

TIP #5: ABOVE ALL, DON'T TAKE IT PERSONALLY

Your 5-year-old screams "I hate you Mommy for leaving Daddy." Your teenager runs up the stairs and loudly slams the door to her room. Your 10-year-old exclaims, "Dad, you never understand me."

At times like this the most important thing to remember is not to take it personally. Recognize that their behaviour is not primarily about you, it's about them—their mixed-up feelings, their difficulty controlling themselves and their limited ability to understand and express their emotions. Taking it personally wounds you, which means you may end up doing what we all do when hurt—either close up, or lash out, or both. Now both of you are not in control or feeling understood and appreciated.

Remembering not to take it personally means you:

- Take a few very deep breaths.
- Remember that this is your child's anger and it doesn't involve you—even when you are being told that it does.
- Release the feeling of being hurt.
- Remind yourself that your child does in fact love you but can't get in touch with it at the moment of being in distress.
- Consciously lower your voice.
- Try to remember what it felt like to be a kid who is upset and over-reacting.
- Think through how to respond calmly and constructively.

You may need to set limits or confront the behaviour, but you can now do it from a calmer place. The idea is to act out of love, rather than anger, when you are setting limits or confronting poor behaviour.

Section 6

MOVING FORWARD: FROM A COUPLE TO CO-PARENTS

When you and your ex-partner were a couple, your interactions as a couple and as parents were bound together. After the separation, you move away from the couple relationship toward forming a new relationship as co-parents. A co-parenting relationship refers to a relationship between parents who are separated or divorced, where the focus of the relationship is on what's best for the children. While not all co-parenting relationships are the same—they may differ in terms of the parenting schedule or how decisions about the children are made—the key aspect is that both parents are focusing on the child's interests.

Why co-parenting? Decades of research on the effects of separation on children converge around a consistent finding that the vast majority of children do better when they have a meaningful relationship with both parents.

- In general, children do best when their parents are actively involved in their lives. This is true for all families, separated or not.
- When parents are more involved with their children, children are less likely to have conduct and emotional problems, or problems with school achievement.
- When asked, the majority of children want contact with both parents on a regular basis.

CHILDREN WANT AND NEED BOTH PARENTS IN THEIR LIVES

Parenting with an ex-partner can be exhausting and infuriating, especially after a painful split. It can be extremely difficult to get past the difficult history you may have had with your ex-partner and overcome any built-up resentment. Making shared decisions, interacting with each other at drop-offs, and just speaking to the person you would rather forget all about might seem like impossible tasks.

But while it is true that co-parenting isn't an easy solution, children benefit when parents work together to focus on their needs. (See box ***What Is Family Mediation?***) Whether children have a father and a mother, or two mothers or two fathers, their need for the loving involvement of each parent is the same. Both parents are important to children for emotional support, protection, guidance, sense of identity and their basic trust and confidence in themselves and in the world.

FATHERS ALSO PLAY AN IMPORTANT ROLE

The critical role played by mothers in children's development is widely acknowledged. In families headed by a mother and a father, research is now highlighting the importance of fathers in children's development. Studies show that children do better when their fathers are regularly involved in their care and form close bonds with them. The same is true after their parents' separation. Both boys and girls benefit from the involvement of fathers who consistently provide emotional support, praise accomplishments, discipline misbehaviour, and support their schoolwork and activities. In fact, studies show that fathers can greatly contribute to children's learning and ability to get along with others when they are consistently affectionate, supportive and involved.

As they grow older, children of involved fathers tend to have better social connections with their peers, do better in school and have fewer behaviour problems.

Another important way fathers can positively influence their children is indirect—by the way in which they interact with the mother. In other words, the quality of the parenting relationship between the mother and father has been shown to significantly strengthen both parents' ability to foster their children's well-being.

What Is Family Mediation?

Family mediation is a dispute resolution process to help separating or divorcing parents resolve their problems and to develop co-parenting agreements out of court. It gives you the power to make your own decisions and to settle your own differences. Mediation works if both parents are willing to cooperate. Mediation can help you:

- separate your spousal role from your parental role
- focus on your children's needs
- concentrate on the present instead of the past
- explore various alternatives for resolving your differences
- reach an agreement on a parenting plan or other parenting issues

Mediation may be a good option when both of you have a desire to work toward a fair arrangement that protects the best interests of your children. Depending on the unique family circumstance, mediation may not be appropriate when

there is violence, child abuse or neglect, chronic alcohol or drug abuse, or serious psychiatric illness on the part of one or both parents.

In mediation, a neutral professional helps you work out a plan on how to care for and share decisions about your children after separation or divorce. A solution agreed to by both of you is usually better than a solution imposed by an outsider, such as a judge, who doesn't know your family. Rather than pitting you against each other, mediation helps build the capacity of parents to communicate and work together on behalf of their children.

Mediation requires considerable effort. Negotiating with a former spouse in the middle of a break-up may seem impossible for some people. However, the effort you put into the process can help reduce future conflict and ensure that the best interests of your children are kept as the focus of discussions.

THE MEDIATOR'S ROLE

The mediator you choose may be a lawyer or a mental health professional with specific training in family mediation. It is the mediator's role to help the family as it reorganizes, and to guide the decision-making process without taking sides or making decisions. Although the mediator must be skilled in family dynamics, child development, conflict management and the law, the mediator is not there to provide legal advice, to write a binding contract or to provide therapy. Rather, the mediator may help you look at things in a different light, give you options and help you look at the pros and cons of the various alternatives in a cooperative way. The mediator does

not pressure either of you into a particular position, but invites both of you to share what you are prepared to do for the sake of the children's best interests.

THE MEDIATION PROCESS

The principles of mediation are the same whether dealing with parenting issues or financial matters, whether dividing parenting time or family assets. The mediator tells you about the process of separation or divorce and what decisions and issues you may face. The mediator provides information and helps you understand your roles during and after your separation or divorce.

INVOLVING CHILDREN IN MEDIATION

Children (generally over the age of 5) may be involved in some parts of the mediation process. The mediator may wish to:

- give children opportunities to discuss their views about decisions affecting them
- give children and teenagers an opportunity to talk about fears regarding their parents' separation or divorce (this might include drawing pictures or writing a letter to their parents)
- gain an understanding of the children's unique developmental needs

(See Section 11—***Resources for information on how to find family mediation services in your area.***)

"GETTING TO YES" FOR THE CHILDREN

Without a doubt, putting aside relationship issues to co-parent your children may be one of the most difficult and stressful tasks you take on. (See box ***"I Do" Agree to Co-Parent.***) But keep in mind that when parents reduce conflict and put their efforts into providing the best parenting possible in their own homes, a major positive change can occur in their children's lives. Why? Through co-parenting, your children should recognize that they are more important than the conflict that ended the relationship—and understand that your love for them will prevail despite changing circumstances. In addition, children are more likely to:

- **Feel secure.** When confident of the love of both parents, children adjust better to the separation and have better self-esteem.
- **Benefit from consistency.** Co-parenting fosters similar rules, discipline and rewards between households, so children know what to expect, and what's expected of them.
- **Better understand problem-solving.** Children who see their parents continuing to work together are more likely to learn how to effectively and peacefully solve problems themselves.
- **Have a healthy example to follow.** By cooperating with the other parent, you are establishing a life pattern your children can carry into the future.

"I Do" Agree to Co-Parent

In our society, there are rituals and ceremonies for birth, for graduation, for marriage, and death. Not so when it comes to separation and divorce. But if there were such a ritual for parental separation or divorce, it might resemble a "ceremony" that formally changes the nature of the relationship between partners. Such a ceremony would acknowledge the grief, loss and anger associated with the dissolution of the personal relationship and formally recognize a new and different relationship as co-parents of the children. The foundation for this "co-parenting" relationship is the parents' love, commitment and optimism for the children. The justification for this ritual can be found in the wealth of research demonstrating that children do better when they have a meaningful relationship with both parents, whether the parents live together or not. At the centre of this ritual, the children experience a safe environment in which to openly share their thoughts, feelings and desires with the adults who love them. The children's input is repeated back by the parents to ensure that they have correctly understood what their children have expressed. The ending of the ceremony connotes the beginning of the parents' work to develop a parenting plan, with the best interests of the children at the top of their minds.

Without a formalized custom, there are, thankfully, a variety of services and resources designed to help keep both parents involved and minimize parental conflict—no matter how painful the split.

CHOOSING THE BEST OPTION FOR REACHING AGREEMENTS

When you're deciding together which parenting arrangement is best for your children and other issues like child support, there are many ways to come to a decision.

You can reach an agreement with the other parent through negotiation (with or without a lawyer), through mediation, or through collaborative law. Or, you can have someone else decide the issue through arbitration (available in some provinces) or by going to court. These are all different types of "dispute resolution."

When relationships end, most parents can agree on how they will parent their children without going to court. Court is costly, time-consuming and stressful. Going to court generally increases the animosity between parents and reduces the chances of them ever working together to raise their children.

A PARENTING PLAN: THE CO-PARENTING MANAGEMENT TOOL

A parenting plan is a written document that outlines how parents will raise their children after separation or divorce. A parenting plan, developed with the best interests of the children in mind, lays out how your children will spend time with each parent; how you will make decisions about your children; how you will exchange information and communicate about your children; how you will handle appointments and extracurricular arrangements for your children; and how you will resolve disputes.

As you review this section, it's a good idea to read the guides on the subject produced by your province or territory and by Justice Canada. The following documents are available on the Justice Canada website:

- *Making Plans: A Guide to Parenting Arrangements After Separation or Divorce* provides helpful information about parenting after separation and divorce and how to decide on the best parenting arrangements for your children. It also includes a helpful glossary of legal terms related to parental separation and divorce.
- *The Parenting Plan* Checklist provides a list of issues for parents to consider when developing a parenting plan.
- *Parenting Plan Tool* provides examples of clauses for parents to use in developing a parenting plan.
- *Federal Child Support Guidelines: Step-by-Step* provides information on options for reaching agreements about child support issues.

(See Section 11—***Resources*** for more information on these guides.)

Setting aside hurt and anger. The key to co-parenting is to focus on your children—and your children only. Co-parenting is not about the past, or who did what to whom but about the children's stability and well-being. In the process of co-parenting, your own emotions—any anger, resentment or hurt—need to take a back seat. This is not to say that your feelings aren't justified or that you don't deserve to have your needs met. On the contrary, there is a time and a place for you to focus on your needs. (See Section 2—***Taking Care of Yourself: Inside and Out*** for information and tools designed to help you feel better and get your own needs met.)

It all begins with your mindset. Think about communication with your ex-partner as having the highest purpose—the well-being of your children.

WHEN COOPERATIVE CO-PARENTING SEEMS IMPOSSIBLE: PARALLEL PARENTING

For parents who feel overwhelmed by their own feelings of anger, grief and loss, sitting down with a former partner on a regular basis to engage in a civil discussion about raising the children may seem out of the question. If it seems impossible for one or both of you to communicate without fighting or name-calling, but you are both involved parents, there is a way to co-parent with minimal contact with your ex-partner.

This approach is called "parallel parenting."

Parallel parenting is actually a term adapted from child development theory. Very young children, under age 3, can learn to play next to one another—in a room, playground or sandbox—before they learn to play cooperatively and share their toys. This works as long *as they leave each other alone* and don't try to take each other's toys, throw sand or interrupt the play in some other way.

With parallel parenting, parental responsibilities are divided and each partner parents fairly independent of the other. Parents communicate with each other only when necessary, in a business-like fashion and only about issues directly related to the children.

In some cases, as strong feelings subside with time, parents are able to shift to a more cooperative form of parenting. In other cases, parents may continue to parent in "parallel" with one another for quite some time. Remember—no matter what form of co-parenting you are doing—it is important to focus on what's best for your children and to shield them from parental conflict. (See box ***Cooperative Parenting vs. Parallel Parenting.***)

Cooperative Parenting vs. Parallel Parenting

Cooperative Parenting ...	Parallel Parenting ...
Parents communicate more freely and directly on large and small issues.	Parents communicate little and by neutral means, such as by e-mail. They do communicate in children's emergencies.
Parenting plans can be flexible and negotiable.	Parenting plans need to be very specific and detailed to avoid conflict and reduce the need for communication.
Transfers of children can be direct.	Transfers occur at neutral locations, such as school, daycare or at an extracurricular activity (for example, one parent may drop off while the other picks up).
Parents consult and discuss their children.	Parents inform one another on issues about the children by e-mail.
The two households are able to cooperate with each other.	The two households operate independently ... "This is what we do in Mom's house; this is what we do in Dad's house." However, remember that younger children thrive when they have consistent routines.
Differing parenting styles can be discussed.	Discussion of parenting styles is off-limits.
Communication can be more general.	Communication is strictly limited to issues about the children.
Meetings can be informal.	Meetings, if they occur at all, are scheduled, time-limited, formal and may require a third party such as a counsellor, mediator or parenting coordinator.
Understandings may remain unwritten.	Decisions related to parenting should be clearly written and shared, for example by e-mail, for clarification and agreement.
No third party needed.	Third parties such as counsellors, mediators or parenting coordinators may be essential to work out changes or disagreements.
Parents are able to talk positively to the child about the other parent.	Parents do not talk about each other in front of the children.

Section 7

HELPING CHILDREN AT EVERY AGE

Although all children and teenagers share many of the same developmental needs—such as a deep need to trust others—their particular age and stage of development are major factors in determining how they react to any situation. Awareness of how children and teenagers grow and develop can help you understand how your children might react to change and the kind of attention and support they will need.

A CHILD'S AGE AND STAGE OF DEVELOPMENT MAKE A DIFFERENCE

This section is designed to help you better understand the developmental needs, typical behaviours and signs of stress in each stage of your child's life. With this knowledge, you will be better equipped to anticipate and respond to your children's needs and to promote their ability to adapt and grow.

You may wish simply to skip to the section that relates to the age of your own child. Remember that every child is unique—the way children react and the way you can respond may not "fit" their age categories precisely. Therefore, you may find it helpful to look over the sections covering the age range just before or after your child's age. Reading later sections may also help you to anticipate your children's needs and changing behaviours as they grow up.

INFANTS AND TODDLERS

There is significant rapid growth in children's development during the first years of life. From birth, children quickly learn to understand a great deal of what is being said and happening around them. Physical development also proceeds rapidly, from crawling to running. Although these changes give children a sense of independence, they still rely primarily on their parents.

A major task at this age is the development of secure attachments, in other words, loving and trusting bonds with parents. This requires regular, consistent and predictable contact with each parent. Infants have a different experience of time. Thus, infants and toddlers may become upset when the parent who takes care of them the most leaves, if only to move into another room in the home. Being apart from this parent for just a few hours, even when the child is left with someone familiar, can be stressful.

During this critical stage of development, infants and toddlers need plenty of loving attention. When babies receive warm, responsive care, they are more likely to feel safe and secure with the adults who take care of them. Very young children can sense when a parent is upset and can in turn become upset, too. At any age, children are quite vulnerable to anxious and troubled feelings of their parents. How could they not be, when their physical and emotional security depends on the physical and emotional security of their parents? (See box ***Typical Behaviours, Developmental Issues and Signs of Stress.***)

Despite rapid progress in their learning, infants and toddlers still have a limited understanding of their world. Changes in routine and conflict between parents are quite bewildering and stressful for very young children. Their lives can feel unpredictable, confusing and at times frightening after their parents separate.

Typical Behaviours, Developmental Issues and Signs of Stress

Age of Child	Infants: Birth to 12 Months	Toddlers: 13 to 36 Months
Typical behaviours and developmental issues	Completely dependent on parents or caregivers for their survival, babies are born with a unique temperament. For example, some are fussy and fearful while others are content and easy-going. (See box ***What Is "Temperament"?***) A baby cannot understand concepts or feelings. But their brains are amazingly active and absorb everything. In fact a baby's brain grows to twice its size just in the first year of life. Babies sleep less and less with each passing month.	Young children of this age begin to show independence by saying "no." They are self-centred, perceiving that the world revolves around them and that "everything is mine." Their growing curiosity and increased mobility means getting into everything and asking "how" and "why." It is hard for them to sit still and stay focused for any length of time. Children this age have a very limited ability to understand concepts or feelings.
Signs of increased stress	Watch for signs that a baby is experiencing difficulties. Changes in sleeping, crying and eating may be signs that your baby is reacting to disruptions in care or routine. More severe signs of stress include lack of energy, unresponsiveness or intense upset. A child with a more fussy or shy temperament will experience more difficulties with any change in routine. (See box ***What Is "Temperament"?***)	When toddlers experience stress, they often revert to earlier behaviours such as waking during the night, having toilet-training accidents, returning to crawling or using less language. Toddlers get angry when they are frustrated. Expect temper tantrums when schedules are disrupted, when enjoyable activities are cut short or are less frequent, and when they must wait to be fed, read to, cuddled or played with. Other indicators of distress include fearfulness (particularly during separation from a parent) and changes in mood (such as over-reaction to minor frustrations, withdrawal and listlessness).

Parental conflict is harmful. Many parents don't realize how upsetting continued conflict with their former partner can be to infants and toddlers. They may assume that because very young children cannot understand the arguments they hear, they will be unaffected by them. In fact, although toddlers rarely understand the details of angry words between parents, they feel the emotions very strongly. It is important that you try to keep a calm, positive attitude in your child's presence.

Separation from a parent is difficult. Separation from a parent is difficult no matter what the circumstances. Attachment to a caregiver is key to an infant's healthy development. As long as there are no prolonged separations or serious threats to a baby's health, the baby will form an attachment to the main caregivers. Therefore, maintaining a strong bond with both parents is important for infants and toddlers. Frequent contact with the parent who no longer lives at home can help young children feel more secure. Parents who do not live with their children need to be patient with toddlers, giving them time to become reacquainted with each stay. Sometimes, the toddler's initial shyness is misinterpreted as a lack of love. The parent is understandably hurt and discouraged and may see the toddler less and less, which makes the problem worse. More contact—not less—may help. Online video communication is a good way for young children to see and hear the other parent. Both parents should do their best to help the toddler feel comfortable with parental visits.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Maintain a routine. Infants and toddlers need consistency and predictability in their daily life. Once parenting and child care arrangements have been made, it is up to parents to maintain consistency in the child's schedule.

- The time of day the child is dropped off and picked up should be kept as regular as possible.
- Routines such as mealtimes, bedtimes and early morning rituals reinforce children's feelings of comfort and security.
- Try to keep a baby or toddler's personal environment as consistent as possible, such as allowing their toys or a special blanket to be brought back and forth between homes.

Ensure regular and frequent contact with both parents. Young children, in particular, need regular contact with both parents:

- Frequent contact with each parent helps young children keep an image of the other parent during a separation:
  - Use online video communication as a way for children to see and hear the other parent, perhaps even reading a storybook together.
  - Allow unrestricted phone calls, especially at the beginning.

- Remember that young children may need more time to adjust to the beginning or ending of a transition:
  - The night before and morning of a transition, prepare young children by explaining the particulars of the transition, such as answering why, when and how.
  - In simple language explain where they are going and that they will be coming back—remind them that they will have their special stuffed animals and/or blankets with them all the time.

Provide lots of stimulation when you are with them. The brains of infants and toddlers literally soak up everything in their environment. They thrive in stimulating environments:

- Talk or sing to them during changes, feedings, while in the car, and during errands. (Even children who cannot speak yet benefit from hearing lots of words, as this exposure to language will help them learn to talk.)
- Hold and touch them frequently.
- Read aloud to them every day.
- Encourage play—with safe objects, toys, and of course, you!

PRESCHOOLERS (3–5 YEARS)

The preschool years bring rapid intellectual, physical and emotional growth. This is a time of growing independence, curiosity and learning.

Despite their considerable physical and emotional achievements, preschoolers have a limited ability to understand separation and divorce. They may blame themselves for both their parents' upset and the separation, may fear abandonment by both parents, and may harbour fantasies of you getting back together.

TYPICAL BEHAVIOURS AND DEVELOPMENTAL ISSUES

Around age 3, children's growing vocabulary allows them to be understood about most things. As this age they start to understand other points of view and with this emerging insight, they can feel and express empathy. They are transitioning from "this is mine!" to a growing ability to share with other children.

Four-year-olds take pride in their growing vocabulary and they like to show it. Parents can expect to be asked a lot of questions and listen to some elaborate tall tales. Some children of this age can be bossy or tattle on others.

Five-year-olds tend to be friendly with peers and adults. They begin to imitate grown-up behaviours. Around this time, children are gaining awareness of what is right and wrong—thus, the emergence of conscience and guilt.

Active imaginations. Children between the ages of 3 and 5 also find it hard to tell the difference between what is real and what is imaginary. This means that they may become confused. Children may think that they are being abandoned by their mother, unloved by their father or that they are being punished for angry feelings. Preschool children are very curious and will actively try to understand the changes in their lives. They now have the ability to try to find answers themselves, and will ask "Why?" "How come?" and "What if?" This ability to understand some events may add to their worries.

Preschoolers are fond of listening to and creating their own "tall tales." They love to exaggerate stories, and they often believe the story they have just told. Parents should not confuse this with lying—in fact, you can use these stories as a way to exchange information and build better understanding. (See Section 3—***Communicating and Connecting with Your Children.***)

Need for both parents. A preschool child's sense of social and emotional independence is not fully developed. Preschoolers continue to rely on their parents and a secure home base to feel safe. At this stage, children need nurturing from both parents—they are beginning to develop a relationship with each parent. Children experience a significant loss when one parent is less involved in their lives. Not only will they

often miss that parent's presence and affection, but some of their physical and emotional needs may not be met. They often have overwhelming fears that both parents will leave them. As with infants and toddlers, preschoolers need lots of visits with the parent who has moved away. Parents need to keep this in mind when they develop their parenting plan. Temperament is a major factor in development and plays an important role in a child's reaction to separation. By the time children are 3 to 5 years of age, most parents can recognize the ways their children cope with stress. (See box ***What Is "Temperament"?***) Some children sulk, others "talk back" or get angry, still others become overly submissive or obedient. It may be helpful to understand that when children are unable to express emotion and cope with stress in their usual ways, they try different approaches. Children who are usually outspoken or talkative may suddenly become withdrawn, and those who are usually submissive or obedient may suddenly become uncooperative.

What Is "Temperament"?

Temperament" is the word used to describe an inborn quality that a child brings into the world. Just as children possess different physical features, they also possess different temperaments. Temperament impacts children's style of learning, their strengths and vulnerabilities.

Temperament is not the same as personality. Personality is the whole person. It includes temperament as well as the effects of the environment through family, neighbourhood, education, life events and culture.

Parents need to resist any temptation to let a submissive or obedient child become their caretaker or to ignore the child who makes fewer demands. It is also important to resist simply punishing an angry and disagreeable child instead of trying to deal with the child's underlying unhappiness.

Child care arrangements. Knowing with confidence who will take care of them, and where, provides preschoolers with feelings of stability and security. You can help by:

- selecting a regular setting for child care
- letting the child take familiar objects to the child care setting, such as stuffed animals, a prized blanket or toys
- maintaining a regular schedule for dropping off and picking up your child at the child care setting
- keeping consistent morning, dinnertime and bedtime routines

If at all possible, it is helpful for you to keep your existing child care arrangements, at least during the beginning stages of separation and divorce. A familiar routine creates a feeling of security for children. When this schedule is disrupted, preschoolers may get upset. If changes in the daily schedule are unavoidable or necessary, you should explain the reasons for the changes. You can also help your preschoolers adjust by going with them to visit the new child care setting before they are dropped off for the first time.

REACTIONS TO STRESS

A young child's distress is often shown by returning to behaviours that they have outgrown. Problem areas may include:

- sleep—a return to bedwetting or recurrent bad dreams, avoiding going to bed
- eating—eating less or more than usual or refusing favourite foods
- physical activity and leisure—such as preferring a tricycle to a bike
- language—returning to baby talk
- emotional development—reverting to crying, clinging or thumb-sucking
- social relationships—refusing to play with other children

Preschoolers can display a wide range of emotional behaviour in a short time. Anger is the most common way for preschoolers to show pain and distress. Hitting, kicking, throwing things, pinching and spitting at other children are common ways for young children to express anger. During the separation, children's expression of anger may increase.

Fearfulness is also a sign of anxiety or tension in preschoolers, particularly when it is in response to events the child used to feel comfortable with. Troubled preschoolers may also show sadness, withdrawal or lack of energy.

Many of these feelings and responses in preschoolers can be related just to growing up. They do not, in themselves, indicate trouble. However, if they are unusually intense, last a long time or interfere significantly with a child's life, they may be signs of distress.

If your preschooler is showing signs of distress, you can help by trying to reduce the sources of your child's distress, and by providing reassurance, stability and comfort.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Children need both parents to be active in their daily lives—preschool children will adapt to longer separations from a parent when they can spend sufficient time with each parent.
- Keep routines consistent and remind children of the routines.
- Preschoolers need simple, concrete explanations—what, why, when and where.
- Listen closely to your preschoolers, watch their actions and respond by communicating with care and understanding.
- Encourage expression of your child's feelings.
- Read stories about children whose parents are separating or now divorced.
- Reassure your children that they are not the cause of the separation and that it is important to love and have a relationship with both parents.

HELP MAKE TRANSITIONS EASIER FOR CHILDREN

The actual move from one household to another, whether it happens every few days or just on the weekends, can be a hard time for children. Transitions represent a major change in your children's reality. Every reunion with one parent is also a separation from the other—each "hello" is also a "goodbye." Transition times are inevitable, but there are some things you can do to help make exchanges and transitions easier—both when your children leave and return. For example, try not to schedule transfers near bedtime or mealtime. Keep the transfers short and address other parenting business at another time.

WHEN YOUR CHILD LEAVES

As children get ready to go to your ex-partner's, try to stay positive and deliver them on time. You can use the following strategies to help make transitions easier:

- **Help children anticipate change.** A good way to do this is to hang a calendar in the kitchen or in the child's bedroom, colour coding the days and nights they are spending at each household. You can then count out with them the number of "sleeps" they have with you until they leave to join the other parent. Another way to help younger children prepare for change is to remind them of the things they will be doing at the other parent's home.
- **Be prepared and pack in advance.** Depending on their age, help children to pack their bags well before they leave so that they don't leave important things behind. You can prepare a checklist and post it in their bedrooms. Go over each child's upcoming schedule to see if special equipment or clothing is needed. The better prepared you are, the easier the transition will be for your child.
- **Always drop off, not pick-up.** It's a good idea to set up the practice of each parent dropping off the children at the other home after their agreed-upon time has ended. If parents come to pick up the children when their time with the other parent is ending, they may interrupt or curtail the important good-bye transition.

WHEN YOUR CHILD RETURNS

The beginning of your children's return to your home can be awkward or even rocky. Think about how you feel on the first day back at work from vacation. Transitions take time. You can try the following to help your child adjust:

- **Keep things low-key.** When children first enter your home, try to have some down time together such as reading a book or another

quiet activity. This gives children the freedom to adjust at their own speed. Above all, refrain from asking questions about the other parent or household.

- **Double up.** To make packing simpler and make children feel more "at home" at each residence, have children keep certain basics such as toothbrush, hairbrush, pajamas and some photos at both houses.
- **Allow children some space.** If your children seem to need some space, do something else nearby. In time, things will get back to normal.
- **Establish a special routine.** Play the same game or serve the same special meal each time your children return. Children thrive on routine—knowing exactly what to expect when they return to you can help ease the transition.

EARLY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CHILDREN (6–8 YEARS)

Children in this age range are trying to gain mastery in school and form new peer friendships. They are proud of their accomplishments. Young school-age children have different needs and abilities than preschoolers. Although early elementary school children are able to express their thoughts and feelings better than younger children, they may still regress to earlier behaviours.

Although children are forming outside friendships and attachments, the family is still the central influence in their lives. Like younger children, early elementary school children need time with both parents, or with role models of both genders. The relationship with the parent who may be less involved with them is very important to children of this age.

Early elementary school children are beginning to understand that parental conflicts are separate from themselves. Yet at the same time, they may be prone to getting into the arguments and to take sides. In this period of development, children's thinking is still black and white—there is right or wrong, good or bad.

TYPICAL BEHAVIOURS AND DEVELOPMENTAL ISSUES

Use of denial and other defences. Denial involves refusing to admit to yourself that you are hurting, or that anything is wrong. Denial is a typical reaction of younger elementary school children to separation and divorce. Children may also become angry and frustrated and bicker with brothers, sisters or classmates, or they may become stubborn and uncooperative at home. These are short-term attempts to cope with their own emotional pain, but neither denial nor anger is an effective defence in the long run. Denial prevents children from accepting and dealing with a difficult situation, while anger usually gets them into trouble with adults and peers at home and at school. Most importantly, neither of these defences helps children overcome their sadness.

Unexplained headaches and stomach aches can be the result of anger or anxiety. Fear and anxiety can also be shown in nervous habits, such as biting nails, rather than fear of a specific event or object.

Increased capacity to imagine the future. Children in early elementary school are learning to form complex thoughts. This results in the ability to imagine other future realities. For children whose parents divorce, this can mean that fantasies, such as being abandoned by the parent they live with, are more likely to arise. These fantasies worry children and heighten their distress over separation and divorce. If a parent remarries, children at this age may fear being replaced by a new baby.

A strong sense of family. Early elementary school children have an increased understanding of their place in the family and how their family fits into society. As a result, their identity remains strongly tied to belonging to a family. (See “Attend to Your Children’s Sense of Identity and Belonging” in Section 5.) Not only are their separate relationships with each parent important, but their love and trust in family have begun to emerge. Thus, separation disturbs the feeling of family that is so important to children of this age.

Feelings of loss. Deep feelings of loss and sadness are the primary features of the process of separation and divorce for young elementary school children. These feelings can come from:

- the loss of peace in the household because of parental conflict
- the loss of security when a parent becomes anxious or upset
- the change in or loss of a relationship with the parent who moves away
- a more distant relationship with the parent they live with because of increased work on the job and at home, or a new adult relationship or remarriage
- the loss of contact with grandparents and other extended family members
- the loss of a sense of stability, control over events and confidence
- the fear that their parents' divorce makes them different from their peers
- the loss of financial resources for their activities

COMMUNICATION IS IMPORTANT

Parents can help early elementary school children adjust to the process of separation by talking directly to them and being clear. Indirect communication may also help—stories about other children who have gone through separation can help your child see how other children cope and help them realize that they are not alone. Tell your children the reasons for the divorce, using an approach and language that's appropriate to their age. Sometimes, it may not be wise to tell them the specific reasons and the details. (See ***"Talking to Your Children About Your Separation and Preparing Them for Change"*** in Section 3.) Assure them over and over that the divorce is not their fault.

Many parents hesitate to have the first talk with their children because they don't want to hurt them. However, some pain is unavoidable.

Children may already be sad and upset by their parents' arguing and general stress and tension. They may feel relieved by finding out what is really going on, and what is going to happen next.

The first talk is an opportunity for you to take responsibility for the problems. It allows your children to know what to expect, and to feel relieved that the arguments may come to an end.

Children need to know exactly what will happen to them. The more information you can give them, the better. Children want to know where they will live and with whom. Things to discuss with them include:

- how often and where they will see the other parent—including the kinds of activities they may do together and what the limitations are, if any
- any changes to the family's schedule or routine, such as a parent returning to work or new chores
- how their siblings will be affected—for example, will all of the children spend time together with the other parent, or separately?

If a change of school is unavoidable, give your children every opportunity to learn about the new school before they start. Also, if one of you is planning a major move, give your children as much time as possible to handle this change in their lives.

Encouraging discussion. It is particularly important for early elementary school children to have opportunities to talk about their feelings and ask questions about the separation and what will happen to their family. As hurt and upset as you may be, it is important to put aside this pain when you talk to your children. Assure them that most children have all sorts of feelings when their parents divorce, and that these feelings are okay.

SIGNS OF STRESS

Some common signs that children are having difficulty with the changes include:

- behaviour problems such as being aggressive, impulsive, manipulative or depressed
- frequent sadness, crying or withdrawal
- problems with sleep, including nightmares and bedwetting
- problems at school, including poor concentration and daydreaming

Ongoing behaviours such as bedwetting or reverting to baby talk are signs that you should discuss with your paediatrician, doctor or counsellor. In addition, ask teachers and other caregivers to watch for changes in the actions and attitudes of your child. The more you know about your child during this transition, the more able you are to help the child adjust.

Prolonged parental hostility. As with children of all ages, strong or long-term hostilities between separating parents are a major source of stress for early elementary school children. Children at this stage of development are especially vulnerable to fantasies about what might happen when parents become angry, and they often worry that they may have caused their parents' relationship troubles.

Early elementary school children want to help their distressed parent. Being needed by a parent makes them feel big, important and loved. Yet children also want their "same old" parent back, so that the parent can resume caring for "me." Children who are allowed to take on too much responsibility for taking care of their parents are robbed of many of the fun, carefree and spontaneous times that belong to childhood. They may develop into "little adults" who feel responsible, yet without the resources to handle such responsibility.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Work with your ex-partner to ensure that both parents remain active and involved in your child's life. (See box ***"Virtual" Parenting.)***
- Reassure your children that the separation is not their fault. Help them to understand that they had no role in your decision to separate.
- Encourage your child to talk directly to each parent and to develop a unique relationship with the other parent.
- Show interest in school and extracurricular activities.
- Allow and encourage phone calls and appropriate online communication with the other parent.

"Virtual" Parenting

The concept of online parenting has been around for a while. When parents travel on business, they make use of videoconferencing and instant messaging to keep in regular contact with their children. The same is true for military families when a parent is deployed. Today, information and communications technology enables parents to "virtually" parent when they are apart, for whatever reason, from their children.

Virtual parent–child contact has the potential to provide separated parents with increased opportunities to communicate and touch base with their children despite physical distance. It can also provide the opportunity for greater consistency of contact by establishing a regular routine. Whether the children divide their time between two homes or whether a parent has relocated, virtual parenting can help maintain regular contact with the parent who is in a different physical location than the child.

In addition to videoconferencing, instant messaging and social media, there are a number of websites that are devoted to creating online activities for parents and children. These new tools can help parents move beyond communicating about daily activities to engaging in virtual homework assistance, electronic learning games, all the way to participating in bedtime routines and going on virtual field trips together.

Virtual contact cannot replace physical time with a parent, as direct contact is essential to maintaining a meaningful parent–child relationship. But information and communications technologies can play an important role in helping separated parents and their children maintain a relevant and seamless relationship. Whatever the situation, virtual parenting opportunities can usually be included in the parenting plan.

PRETEENS (9–12 YEARS)

Significant social and emotional growth gives preteens an increasing sense of independence. This feeling of independence means they place greater importance on the world outside their family. They have greater involvement in school, friendships and extracurricular activities.

Preteens have a growing understanding of human relationships and a more realistic understanding of separation. Although they understand more, they are still unable to deal emotionally with everything they experience. During this period, children are very impressionable and they are forming an internal code of moral values, largely based on what they learn from parents and other adults. About one out of four children this age will perceive one parent as "the good guy" and the other parent as "the bad guy." (See box ***What Happens Next?***)

What Happens Next?

What Happens Next? Information for Kids About Separation and Divorce is a Justice Canada publication to help children between the ages of 9 and 12 years old cope with the separation or divorce of their parents. Its purpose is to help children learn some basic facts about family law and give them an idea of what their family may be going through when their parents split up. It is also meant to help children realize that it's normal for them to have an emotional response to their parents' divorce, and encourages children to voice their concerns to someone they trust.

The What Happens Next? Calendar for Kids is an online calendar for children that helps them keep track of important dates, including the time they will spend with each parent.

(See Section 11—***Resources*** for how to locate and download these publications.)

TYPICAL BEHAVIOURS AND DEVELOPMENTAL ISSUES

Nine- to ten-year-olds display increasing independence, although children this age are quite willing to obey parents and follow instructions. They may develop a tendency to worry or to complain of physical ailments such as stomach aches or headaches. Increased interest in friends and goings-on outside the family is typical for this age group.

Eleven- to twelve-year-olds may begin to become moody or go back and forth between mature or childish behaviour. This is a rapid time of physical growth, particularly for girls. Children of this age may start to

quarrel more with their parents, either occasionally or on a regular basis. Peer relationships are extremely important at this age, with some children beginning to develop crushes or romantic interests. During this period girls may have a better relationship with the father than the mother.

Social withdrawal is a common sign of worry or fear among preteens. Relationships with other children and friends are crucial to the social and emotional growth of children at this age. Lack of involvement in activities with other children outside school, a change in social groups or spending too much secluded time online may be a signal to parents that a child is troubled.

Helplessness turns into anger. Preteens will frequently convert helplessness and sadness into anger. Anger helps prevent preteens from feeling unhappy and emotionally vulnerable. Lashing out at others—usually those closest to them—preteens use anger to project their pain onto others. Some preteens may show aggression, either directly through physical fighting with schoolmates and brothers and sisters, or in bitter, verbal attacks directed at one or both parents. Or a child may argue heatedly with a parent or complain about curfews, Internet and television rules and having to do household chores. Conflicts may also be expressed as physical problems—headaches or stomach aches that are very real and painful. (See ***"Attend to Your Children's Sense of Identity and Belonging"*** in Section 5.)

The likelihood of preteens bullying siblings or schoolmates increases when parents separate—particularly when their parents are engaged in open conflict. When children see that it seems to "be okay" to be aggressive or disrespectful, they are more likely to think "it's okay at school." On the other end of the spectrum, a child who is feeling vulnerable or anxious as a result of parents' separation can be a potential target for bullying. Children who bully other children seek out the most vulnerable in their peer group to pick on.

Let children be children. Although children at this age long to be treated like adults, parents need to resist the temptation to involve them in adult problems. For example, letting them choose the colour of paint for their room is far different from involving them in financial affairs. While many children are willing to provide support to their parents, they are too young to take on this kind of responsibility. Be aware that children who grow up "taking care of their parents" run the risk of emotional difficulties later in life. To make sure your children's developmental needs are being met at this age, encourage them to make friends and to take part in activities outside the family.

Emotional costs of conflict. As with children of any age, the emotional costs of allowing preteens to become directly involved in adult conflicts can be considerable and long-lasting. Preteens experience conflicting loyalties. They may experience strong feelings of guilt, disloyalty and fear. When parents draw children into the conflict, it places children in the unbearable position of choosing one parent over the other.

New adult relationships. When a parent begins to see someone new, preteens must deal with the reality that the parent may have less time and energy for them. They may:

- confuse having less of their parent's time with having less of their parent's love
- consider their parents “still together”
- not be ready to recognize their parent’s sexuality—they have difficulty imagining their parents in a sexual relationship
- feel conflict about whether they should enjoy being with their parent’s new partner

A wide variety of defences. Preteens use more elaborate defences than younger children. For example, they may show their fears in ways that do not make them appear vulnerable or in need of help. It may seem that they are upset at someone else—another child, family member or teacher—or are not troubled or angry. Depending on the maturity of your child, it may—or may not—be helpful for you to confront these defences directly. For example, some 9-year-olds think and act like they are going on 15 years of age, while others seem to act their age. Use your judgment based on how your preteen has responded in the past. If direct communication about their defences or feelings might be interpreted as threatening or invasive, you may want to approach the topic through indirect communication, such as talking about the feelings of characters in a movie. Some defences preteens may use are:

- denying feelings, such as discussing upsetting events in an unemotional way
- displacing feelings, for example, they may fight with friends and other children instead of showing anger at a parent
- becoming overly devoted to a parent (or feeling the need to take care of that parent)
- idealizing and identifying with the absent parent

SIGNS OF STRESS

- intense anger at the parent blamed for causing the separation
- problems at school, such as a drop in grades, or discipline issues
- sadness or an "I don't care" attitude about life
- physical complaints, such as stomach aches, headaches or "not feeling well"

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Provide reassurance, structure and support. Parents sometimes think it's not necessary to explain the separation to their preteens because they are mature enough to see for themselves what is happening. Despite the apparent "sophistication" of some children this age, they do need to hear about the separation from their parents.

Children naturally turn to their parents for understanding, reassurance and support in difficult times. When you do not discuss your separation, children are cut off from their basic way of coping with their questions, worries and troublesome feelings. You can explain the separation and divorce to your preteens in a manner that reflects their level of maturity. Some preteens are young for their age and might relate better to communication styles appropriate for younger elementary school children, while other preteens might respond best to a direct approach that is best suited for teenagers. (See Section 3—***Communicating and Connecting with Your Children.***)

Preteens need you to show your commitment in concrete ways. When you make time to attend school meetings, performances and athletic events, it shows your children that you are there for them. You can help your children build confidence and self-esteem—encourage them to develop their interests in school, sports and arts, help them make new friends, and acknowledge their new-found strengths and growing maturity.

Parents should continue to enforce reasonable limits, rules and curfews—preteens need structure and routine to feel secure. Be firm, but kind. (See box ***A Checklist for Authoritative Parenting*** and ***"Use Discipline to Teach,"*** both in Section 5.) Relaxing the rules to compensate for feelings of guilt over the separation and divorce often leads to further problems.

Other adults can serve as allies and role models for your preteens. Find opportunities for your children to spend time with other trusted adults, such as relatives, neighbours or teachers.

The school is your ally. Keep in touch with your child's teachers, particularly if you suspect your child is being bullied. A teacher can watch out for a child who is feeling more vulnerable or powerless. If a teacher informs you that your child is showing more aggression at school, help your child learn productive ways to express anger and work to reduce your conflict with your ex-partner. When bullying becomes an issue, seek help from school resources or from your family doctor.

TEENAGERS (13–17 YEARS)

During adolescence, teenagers are learning to define who they are and to develop their own values, priorities and goals. Teenagers are also gaining a sense of belonging to a community and to the world around them. In short, teenagers are developing their own identity, a unique identity that is separate from that of their parents.

It's tough being a teenager, even under the best of circumstances. Teenagers have lots of questions, and you may not have all the answers. The teenage years are a time of great change, which adds to confusion and stress. Emotionally, teenagers try to adapt to physical and social changes while trying to become more independent from their parents. More than ever, teenagers need emotional support, love and firm guidance from their parents as they confront these considerable challenges. Despite their physical maturity (and claims for independence), teenagers still need their parents.

Most teenagers see their parents as having positive qualities as well as limitations and faults. After separation or divorce, some teenagers may begin to see their parents only in negative terms. Teenagers often have difficulty understanding how their parents could have let their relationship

deteriorate. They may begin to perceive their parents as selfish or stupid. These impressions can be strengthened as children watch their parents fight or grieve.

TYPICAL BEHAVIOURS AND DEVELOPMENTAL ISSUES

Many teens like to spend more time alone in their room, listening to music or engaging in social media. A growing independence can translate into experimenting with clothes and hair, or "trying on" different beliefs or attitudes. Teens generally want to spend less time with parents and more time with their friends. It is common for some teenagers to show less interest in communicating with parents or other adults about what is going on in their lives.

Conflicting emotions. Because of the confusion and turmoil of the teenage years, stability in teenagers' lives is important. This is why parents' separation or divorce is one of the most difficult life events for a teenager. However, compared with younger children, they have greater resources to help them handle those challenges.

Teenagers are often genuinely shocked to learn that their parents are separating. Although they have usually been aware of tension between their parents, many teenagers do not believe that they will actually divorce. Surprise and shock are often quickly followed by anger and sadness. Teenagers do not like having their lives disrupted. And they are often disappointed because their parents could not keep the family together. Teenagers may recognize their own feelings, but may not understand exactly why they are angry, sad or intensely critical of their parents.

Teenagers may feel some of these common conflicts:

- anger at one parent or both parents, versus love for both parents
- loyalty to both parents, versus the tendency to take sides or choose one parent over the other
- affection for a parent's new partner, versus anxiety over sexuality in the parent's adult relationship
- giving the appearance that everything is fine, versus the need to be cared for and protected

Teenagers experience other difficulties as well. They may see the separation as "proof" that the parent who leaves does not really love them or want to be with them. Teenagers are also vulnerable because their parents may try to use them as spies and messengers, but they may also strongly reject these roles as well.

Anger: A common and visible emotion. Teenagers are sometimes overwhelmed by their own anger. Intense conflicts between parents can be very upsetting to them. They find it difficult to admit that their parents put themselves in such unpleasant circumstances and that they hurt each other so much. Teenagers may also learn from arguing parents that the uncontrolled expression of anger is acceptable (or the opposite—that anger should be concealed or disguised). Troubled teenagers often express anger toward parents, brothers and sisters, teachers, friends, other children and physical objects. Fighting, destruction of property, and yelling and screaming are the clearest examples of anger in action. Drug and alcohol abuse, withdrawal or refusal to participate in activities, poor grades, skipping school, stealing and poor eating habits are often the result of anger, although the teenager may not be aware that anger is motivating this behaviour.

Other common responses. In addition to anger, teenagers may also:

- feel a great amount of stress
- develop a fear of the future
- feel an exaggerated need to organize their world
- question the concept of love and whether it can last
- worry if they will ever be able to have happy relationships themselves
- perceive parental dating as a threat or resist a parent's new partner

SIGNS OF STRESS

- drinking and experimenting with drugs
- drop in school grades or behaviour problems at school
- intense anger or outbursts
- withdrawal and isolation from family and friends
- seems not to care about anything or always tired
- spending time with friends who take greater risks

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Direct communication is best. Although younger children often benefit from indirect communication, teenagers can cope with the news better if both parents discuss the separation directly with them. It is best for you to talk with teenagers together with any younger children in the family, and then again separately. This helps teenagers feel that their increasing maturity is recognized.

Parents should talk realistically about the divorce and what they think it will mean to the everyday life of their teenagers. Parents can stress the need for mutual patience and sensitivity—just as it takes time for teenagers to adapt, parents don't "have it all worked out" either.

Direct communication and a willingness to compromise on some issues of disagreement will help teenagers adapt to their new circumstances and continue the regular growth and development of adolescence. A sensitive combination of direct communication, negotiation that acknowledges their needs while setting reasonable limits, and respect for their growing independence will generally be the most effective strategy. Remember, fair but consistent rules teach teenagers to respect themselves and others.

Learn about adolescence. In the past few decades, research has yielded a lot of information on what is going on physically and mentally during the teen years. Ask your family doctor or a counsellor for some good books or articles on the topic or search online. Even without any major changes in their home or school, it is expected that teenagers will often exhibit different or negative behaviours. Testing the rules, arguing with parents and siblings or becoming uncommunicative are fairly common behaviour changes in the teenage years. The more you know, the more likely you will be able to figure out if these changing behaviours are related to the separation or to the ups and downs associated with adolescence. The more you know about your teen, the better able you will be to help your teen manage this confusing stage of development and the transition into young adulthood.

Don't sweat the small stuff. Your willingness to compromise on some issues will go a long way when you need to stand your ground on major issues related to their well-being and safety. For example, give them more freedom to decide on dress and hair or what they put up on their walls. Some fights just aren't worth it. And by showing that you are willing to negotiate on some things, you show that you are acknowledging their needs and respecting their growing independence.

Help teenagers keep their friends. If possible, keep teenagers in their current school where they have already developed a network of friends. Some of these friends may have experienced divorce in their own family. Make it easy for teenagers to see their friends regularly, and work to ensure that the separation and divorce process does not take up all of their time and energy. It's natural for teenagers—regardless of whether or not their parents are together or separated—to sometimes choose to spend time with friends or extended family members rather than with a parent. If there is a move to a new location or long trips between their parents' residences, teenagers will need to make new friends and adapt to new situations, which can make this life event even more difficult and stressful. It will take time for them to adjust.

Other things you can do:

- If your teens are having trouble telling their friends about the separation, assure them that it is okay to take their time on sharing the news. If they ask, you can share some possible language for them to use. (See Section 3—***Communicating and Connecting with Your Children.***)
- Respect your teen's need to be alone at times, but make sure your teen knows that you are available if needed.
- Avoid making your teen your best friend or companion.
- "Do as I say, not as I do." Teens become very aware—and often highly critical—of their parents' double-standards. They are particularly adept at detecting dishonesty, double standards and manipulation. Enforcing consequences after certain behaviours won't work if teens see that you do not follow through on what you say you will do. Try to be consistent and model the behaviours you expect from your children.
- Avoid waiting until things get out of control—seek help from school or professionals when you see troubling, recurrent behaviours or if your teen withdraws and appears depressed.

Section 8

SPECIAL ISSUES AND CONCERNS

When parents separate, their children's world is turned upside down. It makes perfect sense because their family is all they know and is the source of their identity. For most children, slowly but surely they will adapt to the changes and develop healthy individual relationships with each parent. Unfortunately, that is not the case for all children. In circumstances in which a parent abandons a child, when a child for whatever reason rejects one parent or when family violence is an issue, things can go very wrong for children. Children simply don't have the adult mental tools to make sense of the painful, complex and often contradictory feelings that come with these situations. Getting professional help for you and the children involved is the first and best step. Schools may have counsellors on staff or visiting psychologists or social workers. Reach out until you find the support and guidance you need.

WHEN A CHILD IS ABANDONED

Abandonment can take many forms: the parent who walks away and refuses to have any further contact with the child; the absentee parent who rarely communicates with or sees the child; and the parent who slowly drifts away (either by choice or because of the other parent's manipulation of the child). Whatever the situation, children who are abandoned by a parent may experience guilt, confusion, grief, fear, anger, withdrawal, a retreat into a fantasy world and depression.

Children who are abandoned often feel an overwhelming sense of rejection. The thought that one parent no longer loves them, wants them or even cares about them is potentially devastating to a child's sense of self and future ability to form healthy, loving relationships.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

As the parent who is involved, the responsibility falls to you to influence your children's self-worth and help them cope with the other parent's absence. You can help, first and foremost, by providing comfort and a sense of security. On top of that emotional base, you can help your children deal with the grief of abandonment by adapting your comfort and support to their reaction. For example, children who have been abandoned may go in the direction of rejecting everything about the absent parent. You'll see this when a child expresses the desire to be the exact opposite of the absent parent. In this instance, parents can help by:

- affirming the child's unique qualities
- allowing the child to share thoughts and feelings openly
- responding to a child's rejection of the other parent by saying, "It makes sense why you might feel that way right now"

Some children may go in the other direction by developing an intense yearning for the absent parent. In this case, children may over-identify with the absent parent and develop a set of comforting fantasies that are not based in reality. Parents can help by:

- allowing children to freely verbalize their memories of the absent parent
- avoiding the temptation to correct the children's distorted recollections

Children with abandonment issues may develop self-worth and shame surrounding the parent's absence. They may even question whether:

- they could have contributed to the absence
- they somehow "deserved" to be abandoned
- the absent parent believes that he or she is better off without the "burden" of the child

In this situation, children need to be assured that they did nothing to cause the parent to leave, that they are very much loved and lovable, and that adults sometimes make very bad decisions. In addition, counselling is recommended to help children work through their grief and move on.

Children who have been abandoned may also have difficulty expressing their emotions. They may keep their emotions bottled up, lacking the trust necessary to share their true selves with others. They need to be reassured that feelings are neither good nor bad and that it is better to share feelings than keep them inside.

Most children who have experienced abandonment by a parent will benefit from relationships with other adults who can serve as role models and provide them with experiences that would have been shared with the absent parent. A grandparent, aunt or uncle, a close adult friend—any of these trusted individuals could agree to take on a more proactive and sensitive role.

WHEN A CHILD REJECTS ONE PARENT

Although abandonment poses significant risks for children, those children caught in loyalty conflicts—in which they feel they must choose one parent over the other—may face even more difficulties in life.

Most children want contact with both parents on a regular basis. Some children, however, do not crave more time with an absent parent. Instead, these children show extreme reluctance to be with a parent, resist contact with the parent or out-and-out reject the parent.

The reasons why children shun one parent vary. Sometimes children have good reasons to reject a deficient parent, perhaps because of abuse, addiction or abandonment issues. Other times, children appear to decide by themselves to pull away from the parent they blame for the separation. Without the same tools as adults to deal with conflict and pain, some children may react by shutting out one parent. But for some children who begin to shun one parent, their reasons generally mimic the other parent's negative attitudes.

The reasons why parents interfere in their children's relationship with the other parent vary as well. Some parents are so blinded by rage and a wish to punish their ex-partner that they lose sight of their children's need to love and be loved by both parents. Some parents foster their children's rejection of the other parent because they truly believe that their ex-partner is a bad parent or does not act in the best interests of the children. Still others unintentionally affect their children's relationship with the other parent by even occasionally sharing frustrations and accusations in front of the children. Regardless of the motives, withdrawing from a parent who loves them can cause deep psychological problems for children.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A CHILD WHO UNREASONABLY REJECTS A PARENT

- Although others may see clearly that a child's negative attitude toward one parent developed in the shadow of the other parent's hostility, the child usually denies any such influence.
- The child develops a relentless hatred for one parent.
- The child does not want to visit or spend any time with one parent.
- The child is frequently unable to explain the reasons for the rejection of the parent. In fact, some of the reasons may not only be false, but grossly exaggerated or seemingly ridiculous.
- The child previously enjoyed a positive relationship with the shunned parent.
- The child lacks the capacity to feel guilty about the negative behaviour toward the rejected parent.
- The child has almost no ability to see anything positive about the rejected parent, either from the past or in the present.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

For all parents. First and foremost, keep in mind that after the separation children need your support and help to develop a separate, meaningful relationship with both parents. When children are constantly exposed to negative comments about the other parent or feel the need to choose one parent over the other, their emotional well-being is at risk.

The time to intervene is when a child starts to resist spending time with one parent. Counselling is encouraged to help clarify the underlying reasons for the child's behaviour and address them immediately. Otherwise, a child's reluctance to interact with a parent may continue to get worse—thus interfering with the child's healthy emotional development.

If your child doesn't want to see you...

- Don't give up.
- Keep your anger and hurt under control. Losing control will only feed the problem.
- Don't retaliate.
- Focus on keeping your relationship with the children positive.
- Work with your mediator, lawyer or therapist on seeking solutions that are aligned with the best interests of the children.

WHEN THERE IS VIOLENCE IN THE HOME

Separation can increase the likelihood of violence in the home, particularly during and after the actual physical separation. This increased risk also applies to families where family violence has not occurred in the past.

You are not responsible for your partner's anger, violence or abuse. However, how you react and what you decide to do in this situation is your responsibility. The very first thing is to protect yourself and your children. Reach out and talk to a friend, family member or someone you trust or call a helpline. When you need immediate help, call 9-1-1 without hesitation. Safety for you and your children needs to be your priority.

For parents and children leaving an abusive home, the period after separation can be a time when the violence escalates. It is important for you to find a safe place to stay with your children and to develop a comprehensive safety plan to help you remain out of danger and plan the next steps. Community help lines and services organizations, crisis centres, and shelters may be available to help you during this transition. If these programs or services are not available in your area, ask family and friends if they can help you.

For children and youth, violence in the family often has a traumatic effect, causing their behaviour to change. It is typical for them to be afraid, upset and angry. Even if they seem to be coping well, your children need extra attention and care. Be aware that they are very sensitive to your own attitude and what you say in the situation. When you talk with your children about the other parent, it's important that you say only what you need to.

Regardless of their age, children from violent homes are at an increased risk of behavioural and developmental problems. They often suffer from anxiety and depression, and they may exhibit more aggressive, antisocial, inhibited or fearful behaviours. Even if they have not been abused themselves, children who are exposed to violence may experience similar symptoms to those children who are themselves physically abused.

Children who witness violence in the home often have a persistent fear for their own safety and the safety of brothers, sisters and the abused parent. They may also blame themselves for not being able to stop the violence (for example, by behaving better). For these children, feelings of self-blame, guilt, anger and fears about being different from other children may be more acute. They need help to understand that they did not cause the violence and could not have stopped it. They need to know that it is okay for them to feel angry and sad about losses that have resulted from the violence. (See box ***What Children Need to Hear About Family Violence.***)

WHAT YOU CAN DO

There are several things you can do to help your children deal with family violence:

- Assure them that you love them.
- Show them that despite the difficulties, you are in charge.

- Make sure they understand that the violence is not okay, it's not normal, it's not their fault, and nobody deserves to be abused.
- Tell them as much as you can without name-calling—in other words, challenge the behaviour not the person (remember, your children love the abusive parent, even though it feels confusing to them).
- Listen to their feelings, assure them that these feelings are okay, and share some of your own feelings.
- Set limits in a firm, loving manner.
- Take a little time every day to have some fun with them.
- Encourage them to have friends and activities as soon as you resettle.
- Let them be dependent—they need to be able to depend on you.
- Let them know that you also need to have friends and to spend some time alone.
- Credit yourself for your courage and strength. Remember that you have made positive choices for you and your children.

What Children Need to Hear About Family Violence

- "It's not okay."
- "It's not your fault."
- "It must be very scary for you."
- "You do not deserve to have this in your family."
- "There is nothing you could have done to prevent this."
- "I will help you to stay safe."
- "Please tell me how you feel, I want to know."
- "You can still love someone and not like what they are doing."

WHEN YOU SUSPECT CHILD ABUSE

All parents should become familiar with signs of child abuse. Parents should call the police or their local child protection office if they believe their child has been abused. Everyone has a duty to report a child in need of protection to the authorities.

It is important to note that some parents suspect sexual abuse when they notice their young children touching or stroking themselves. It's normal for young children to explore their bodies and comfort themselves by stroking their genitals. During times of stress, parents may find that these natural behaviours may increase. However, if the behaviour persists or you are worried about it, you should talk to your family doctor. If you have questions about how to recognize child sexual abuse, call your local child protection office or the police. You are responsible for the safety of your children.

(See Section 11—***Resources*** for specific information on where to get support and information on family violence. Counselling is strongly recommended for children who have witnessed family violence or have themselves been abused.)

Section 9

NEW RELATIONSHIPS, DATING AND BLENDED FAMILIES

After the pain of separation or divorce, a new relationship can be a welcome relief and source of excitement for a parent. But for a child, it means facing even more changes and the loss of the dream that the parents might get back together. Every situation is different. But even when a child appears positive about the new partner, one thing remains true—a parent's new partner is a big adjustment for children—another on top of all those that occurred before.

Think of it this way: Parents and children have very different needs. For parents, as adults they naturally get excited about the possibility of a new fulfilling relationship. For children, they want the security and love from their parents to remain the same. (See box ***Remember What All Children Need Regardless of Age.***)

Remember What All Children Need Regardless of Age

All children need to feel:

- **Safe and secure.** Children have already experienced pain and grief over the loss of living with both parents under one roof. They want to be able to count on their parents to take care of their needs for nurturing and security.

- **Seen and valued.** All children have a developmental need to be loved and valued for who they are and to feel understood and appreciated. Children can feel unimportant or brushed aside in new blended families. It's important to remind the children that they have a unique place in the blended family and to recognize each child when making family decisions.
- **Understood and emotionally connected.** Particularly when the family structure changes, it is easy for children to feel misunderstood or on their own to deal with their problems or emotions. Encourage children to express their feelings and help them learn to manage them. Show them that you are able to see a situation from their perspective.
- **Appreciated for their effort and encouraged.** Especially during this time of yet another transition, recognize children for their efforts to get along and make it work. Encourage them in their pursuits and continue to thank them for their contributions.
- **Consistencies in limits and boundaries.** This will be tricky, but try not to avoid setting reasonable and fair limits with consequences. In blended families, it can be common to find inconsistencies among discipline. For example, one child may be restricted or disciplined more often while another is let off for poor behaviour. Not only will these inconsistencies create conflict between the children, but increase behaviour problems. Children need limits and consequences that are fair, consistent and appropriate. (See ***"Use Discipline to Teach"*** in Section 5.)

WHEN PARENTS START DATING

In some families, a new adult relationship may have started before the separation, or may begin in the early stages of separation. In others, a new person may not enter the picture for months, years or ever. Some parents don't want to start going out with someone new until they and their children have had plenty of time to adjust to the "new normal" of their lives after the separation. For others, dating helps them adjust to the separation. It reaffirms their self-worth, reduces feelings of loneliness, and helps them get on with their lives.

If the relationship ends after one parent leaves the relationship for another partner, children may feel particularly betrayed and angry. Children in these families will need plenty of opportunities to express their confusion and feelings—a difficult task for a parent who may be experiencing similar emotions.

Children have mixed emotions about their parents' new relationships. Depending on their age, they may feel betrayed, jealous, relieved or more secure. For example, they may:

- believe that the parent who is first to begin a new relationship is betraying the other parent
- feel happy when a parent is noticeably happier
- feel they have been abandoned again and experience a renewed loss when parents spend time with another adult
- continue to hope their parents may get back together again—no matter how often parents have told children that getting back together won't happen, many children continue to hope, even after a second marriage
- feel embarrassed that parents have sexual feelings and a need for affection—this is especially true for children in their preteens and early teens

- feel relieved when a parent has found someone to help fulfill their adult needs
- feel anger at being forced by adults to make another adjustment—how children act out this anger depends on their developmental stage
- feel like life is back to normal because a parent is no longer single—without the tensions before the separation
- resent that parents have their own rules for sexual behaviour and enforce what may seem like different rules for their children—teenagers are especially likely to feel that while they have curfews or have to date people their parents know and approve of, their parents seem to follow a different standard
- be upset at the loss of privacy when a new adult enters their world at home

DATING AGAIN: CAUTIONS AND TIPS

- Keep in mind that dating and remarriage can increase conflict between co-parents, particularly if only one parent has a new partner.
- Realize that you are crushing the possible reunion fantasy dreams of your children. Don't underestimate its power—some children cling to the belief that their parents will get back together even after one parent has remarried. The reason is simple—a child's own identity is very much tied to that of the child's family. When the family falls apart, a child's sense of self is threatened even when the child maintains a strong relationship with each parent. (See ***"Attend to Your Children's Sense of Identity and Belonging"*** in Section 5.)
- Avoid a quick turnaround. Parents who begin dating quickly after the end of a relationship or who reach a quick decision to re-couple after a brief dating period often find their children more resistant to the relationship. The key is to take your time to get to know your partner. There are many benefits to going slow—for you and your children.

- Healthy dating begins with self-examination. Try to examine your motivation for dating, your fears, loneliness and unresolved hurt.
- As much as possible, come to an agreement with your ex-partner on how and when to introduce a new person in your life to the children.
- Arrange the "meeting the kids" time with care. Early on your children may meet your date. As your interest in the person grows, gradually plan more time for your dating partner and your kids to get together. Tread lightly at first and continue to monitor everyone's fears or concerns.
- Listen to your inner wisdom—it may help you avoid certain problems or poor decisions.
- Offer soft invitations to older children. Teens and children need to move toward your dating partner at their own pace. Trying to get them to accept your new partner and relationship could easily backfire.
- Acknowledge and label children's fears. Children of all ages benefit when a parent says something like "I can see that the idea of my dating scares you and I appreciate your honesty." This kind of acceptance and support keeps the communication door open, and helps children put labels on their own emotions.
- Expect hot/cold reactions. Liking a parent's dating partner sometime creates a loyalty problem for children. Because they may be caught in a loyalty conflict, children sometimes warm up nicely to the person you are dating and then turn cold. Confusion comes with the territory.
- Learn all you can about stepfamily living. If your relationship is getting serious, take the time to find out what you need to know beforehand that can make the transition smoother for everyone involved.

NEW AND BLENDED FAMILIES

Stepfamilies and blended families differ from original family relationships in many ways. The stepparent enters a new family group that already has a shared history, strong bonds and an established way of operating. And the adjustment is much more significant for the children. For example, children who have not adjusted to parental dating will have even more intense problems as they try to adjust to their newly blended family. (See box ***Stepfamily vs. Blended Family.***)

Stepfamily vs. Blended Family

"Stepfamily" and "blended family," although they appear to be interchangeable, are terms that refer to slightly different family arrangements:

- **Stepfamily** refers to a family where at least one of the parents has a child from a previous relationship.
- **Blended family** refers to a family with two parents who have children from different relationships, and may include a child of the current relationship.

When families blend, children may have to deal with new stepbrothers and stepsisters, new grandparents, aunts and uncles. They may find it hard to accept changes in discipline and the authority of the stepparent. They may be jealous of the time and attention given to the new partner, stepbrothers and sisters. They may feel that they are treated unfairly compared with their new siblings. A new baby may also spark feelings of anger and insecurity. Children may also find it difficult to adjust when their rank in the family has changed, especially if they were previously an only child.

In some cases, stepparent and stepchildren are suddenly thrown together, without the chance to develop a relationship gradually. The clashing of different rules, goals, definitions of behaviour and methods of child-rearing can cause many problems, and a satisfying relationship between stepparents and children usually develops slowly. This is not surprising, since closeness, affection, friendship and trust usually need time to develop.

Parents may find that being aware of these issues can help them better prepare their children for the new circumstances. Parents should make a special effort to spend time alone with their children to help reinforce that they are part of the new life you are building.

Parents can help stepchildren deal with changing roles and circumstances by being patient and kind, and giving them lots of time to adapt to their personality and lifestyle. Acknowledge that you will never replace their mother or father, and work on developing a unique relationship with the children. A stepparent can become a trusted and significant adult for the children. Try not to compete with, replace or be critical of the other parent.

BLENDING FAMILIES: SKILLS AND STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

The wealth of experience of parents who have gone before you, coupled with research studies on the impact of blended families on children's development, suggest ways that you can improve the chances for a successful relationship and well-adjusted children. It's important to be patient when creating a new family. In fact, it can take years before relationships and life together take root.

- **Proceed slowly and prepare yourself and your children well.** Although the temptation with new love is to move quickly, everyone will benefit by taking the time to adjust to the new relationships. Be patient, go slow.

- **Work on your intimate relationship.** Everything depends on the depth and strength of your intimate relationship. Talk together about what went wrong in your previous relationships and what you both have learned, particularly in the area of managing disagreements and parenting styles. The ideal time to discuss these issues is *before* making a commitment.
- **Make parenting decisions and adjustments before you move in together.** Think about the needs of each child and how best to support them. Blended families that do better are those in which family members are civil to one another, relationships are respectful and there's appreciation for the differences in age and maturity levels. If you are already blended together in one household, it's never too late to develop healthy and consistent family rules and ways of relating to one another. Daily life provides the opportunity to practise, practise, practise.
- **Clearly define your parenting roles and responsibilities.** Couples should discuss the role each stepparent will play in raising their respective children, as well as changes in household rules. A good rule of thumb—establish the stepparent as a trusted adult as opposed to a disciplinarian. The parent should remain primarily responsible for discipline if and until the stepparent has formed strong bonds with the children. In the meantime, try to keep the rules and consequences fair and consistent.
- **Maintain positive co-parenting relationships.** New relationships do better when co-parenting relationships with former partners are respected. And, children will adjust better to the blended family if they maintain strong relationships with both of their parents. Everyone benefits when relationships between former partners are respectful and reasonably polite. Let the children know that you and your ex-spouse will continue to love them and be there for them throughout their lives. Tell your children that your new spouse will not be a replacement mom or dad, but another person who will strive to love and support them.

- **Maintain each child's community of support.** A child's community of support provides a place of belonging. This community includes family, child care, school and friends. In particular, grandparents and other members of the extended family are very important for children, especially if they have already established a close relationship. Help your children stay connected and involved with the people and places that are important to them.
- **Keep channels of communication open.** When communication is encouraged and frequent, there are fewer opportunities for misunderstandings and more possibilities for connection. Try to establish an open and non-judgmental atmosphere. Help the shy child to express thoughts and feelings. Use dinnertime as an opportunity for the children to share the events of their day and get to know each other better.
- **Manage conflict, anger and stress.** It may be tempting to avoid conflict or hope that it will go away, but often the opposite happens. Conflict involving stepparents and stepchildren can quickly erode the quality of the intimate relationship, so it is best to manage disagreements, hurt feelings and other sources of conflict between them. In the process of dealing with conflict, children do need to learn to respect the stepparent. (See box ***Children Adjust Differently—by Age and Gender.***)
- **Limit your expectations.** Expect some bumps along the way. No one who has gone before you would say that starting a new blended family is easy or uncomplicated. There are a lot of variables that you can't control, such as how other family members are going to react to the combining of families. But keep in mind that the effort is well worth it. Your goal in uniting is to be happy and fulfilled as a family. Repeat the mantra: Proceed slowly and give things time to settle.

Children Adjust Differently—by Age and Gender

Children of different ages and genders will adjust differently to a blended family. Children of the same age will adjust differently as well, depending on their history and personalities. For example, some children may be more willing to open up and engage while others may require a lot of time to accept the changes. Although it's wise to adjust your approach with children of differing ages, genders and temperaments, the overall goal remains the same—establishing a trusting relationship with each child.

Age/ Gender	How They Adjust
Young children under 10	• May adjust more easily because they want to belong to a family • Can be more accepting of a new adult • Are more dependent on parents for meeting their daily needs—therefore, may feel competitive for their parent's attention
Children aged 10–14	• May have the most difficulty adjusting to a stepfamily • Are less able to accept a new person as a disciplinarian • Appearances may be deceiving—they may not appear sensitive or share their feelings, but they may be as sensitive or more sensitive than young children when it comes to needing love, attention and discipline
Teenagers 15 or older	• May want less involvement in step or blended family life • Tend to separate from the family—whether intact or reconstituted—as they develop their own unique identities • May be less open in expressing their affection or insecurities, but they still want to feel loved, important and secure
Gender Differences	• Both girls and boys in blended or stepfamilies tend to prefer verbal affection, such as praises or compliments, rather than physical closeness like hugs and kisses • In general, girls tend to be uncomfortable with physical displays of affection from their stepfather • In general, boys seem to accept a stepfather more quickly than girls

Section 10
CONCLUSION

BECAUSE LIFE GOES ON ...

When times are hard, it is important for parents to remember that all children face challenges as they grow up. Some move from school to school, from community to community. Some experience the death of a family member—a grandparent or older relative, and sometimes a parent or sibling. Some face serious illness or disability. Through the love and care children receive from parents and other caregivers, they cope, learn and mature. Children have a tremendous capacity to bounce back from difficult experiences when they experience consistent love, nurturing and engagement from their parents.

This third edition of *Because Life Goes On ...* is based on the Public Health Agency of Canada's definition of mental health: The capacity of all of us to feel, think and act in ways that enhance our ability to enjoy life and deal with the challenges we face. It is not accidental that the Agency's definition of mental health includes enhancing our ability to deal with life's challenges. Despite the difficulties and pain, like other challenges in life, separation can provide opportunities for growth—for both parents and children.

There are going to be plenty of bumps and choppy sailing as changes in the family structure and living situation occur—for you, your ex-partner and your children. That's a given. But you do have a choice about how you experience the aftermath of your separation or divorce, depending on your perspective. It can mean shame and failure or bring about chronic warfare. Alternatively, it can provide an opportunity for you to

end old antagonisms, heal long-standing wounds, and launch a fresh start toward a new and improved life situation. You can't change the past, but you can choose what you do with it. You and your children are worth it.

Because life goes on ...
Because we are called to
Respond to its challenges
Because we best see the light
With our eyes wide open.

Section 11
RESOURCES

LINKING YOU TO WHAT YOU NEED

Fortunately, there are a number of excellent online resources, provincial and territorial services, books, guides, and community programs that are available to help you and your children. Online resources are available anywhere, if you have access to a computer and Internet service or a smart phone. However, the availability of provincial/territorial or community programs varies depending on where you live in Canada.

Over time, books and articles become out of date and Internet links to relevant websites or online resources can change or no longer function. This can become very frustrating when you are looking for timely and trustworthy information or assistance. This resource section is designed to help you find up-to-date information by yourself. Things can change quickly, including your needs. Using your computer or smart phone as your guide, you can stay up-to-date. And, ask for help. You may be surprised by the amount of resources and resource people available to help you when you need it.

If you don't have a computer with Internet service or a smart phone, your local library is the best place to go. A librarian can show you how to use the Internet; get you set up on a library computer; and show you to the section of the library that has books related to parenting after separation. (See box ***An Internet Site You'll Want to Know About.***)

An Internet Site You'll Want to Know About

The Families Change website, produced by the Justice Education Society of BC, is a very helpful age-appropriate resource that provides information on separation and divorce for teens, parents and professionals. Animation, text, audio and video combine to help families and youth better cope with separation or divorce. This innovative website, available in both English and French, provides general information and does not replace the specialized advice of lawyers and other experts.

To visit this site, use your search engine of choice, typing in the words "Families Change Canada." Once on the Internet site, you will find the following interactive programs:

- *A Kids' Guide to Separation and Divorce* is designed to help children aged 5 to 12 to understand what is happening to their family.
- *A Teen Guide to Parental Separation & Divorce* is designed to help preteens and teens to deal with the changes happening in their family.
- *Changeville* is an interactive game for children and youth which guides young people through the changes and feelings they might experience during their parents' separation.
- *A Parent Guide to Separation and Divorce* provides information on dealing with change, feelings and emotions; how to tell the children; and child support.
- A comprehensive *Online Parenting After Separation Course* covers the same topics as the in-person workshops available in British Columbia. The information offered in this course will be of interest to all parents in Canada. This online course is available in English, Punjabi and Mandarin.

- A comprehensive online course on *Parenting After Separation: Finances* that includes a downloadable handbook for parents on managing finances after separation.
- And more.

WHAT DO I DO WHEN ...

... I NEED TO FIND QUALITY CHILD CARE.

Using your search engine, type "*Finding Quality Child Care—A Guide for Parents in Canada.*"

This comprehensive and practical site provides information for parents in Canada looking for quality child care that's affordable and meets the needs of their families. Find out about how to find child care in your province or territory (including fees, subsidies and eligibility requirements); general information about child care in Canada; and what the best evidence says about quality. When you are on the site's home page, simply follow the prompts to watch an instruction video, learn more about who pays for child care in Canada, find child care in your province or territory, and some tips on how to find the best care for your child.

… I'M LOOKING FOR LOCAL SUPPORT OR ASSISTANCE

Your family doctor is a good resource for information on a number of topics and can provide you with referrals to specialists, programs and services in the community. A community health centre, if there is one located in your area, is also a good source of information and support.

Your children's early learning program or school is another good source of information and support. In particular, school systems often hire psychologists, nurses, counsellors or other child-serving professionals. Contact the local program or school or speak to your child's teacher.

Family Justice Services in your province or territory may also be able to provide you with information or services that you need. (See below for information on how to find out about these services in your area.)

There are a number of self-help groups (some well-known, others less so) that may be meeting in your area. In addition, local hospitals and community centres offer special lectures or meetings on topics that may be of interest to you. Search the Internet by typing in "support group on (add topic) in (add name of community or closest city)." Or try searching for "programs on (add topic) in (add name of community or closest city)."

… I HAVE FINANCIAL NEEDS

If you find yourself in a situation in which you need financial assistance, the best way to get information is to use your search engine, typing in "financial assistance, Government of (and add the name of your province or territory)." You will find information on the kinds of available financial assistance in your particular jurisdiction, eligibility requirements, and how to apply.

In addition, the online course on *Parenting After Separation: Finances* (see box ***An Internet Site You'll Want to Know About***) may also be of use to you.

… I'M CONSIDERING GETTING BACK TOGETHER AS A COUPLE

If you or your partner are having second thoughts or want to explore getting back together, you are encouraged to seek guidance from trained therapists, mediators or health professionals.

Using your search engine, type in "best books on marital relationships" or best books on relationship problems." Read the book reviews to find out if a book seems right for you. For couples' counselling resources in your area, use your search engine, typing in "marriage counsellors" or "couples' counselling" in (add your town or nearest city). In addition, your family doctor may have recommendations on specific counsellors, therapists or workshops.

… I NEED LEGAL SERVICES AND INFORMATION

Justice Canada's Internet site provides useful information on family law, including such topics as child support and parenting arrangements after separation or divorce. It also links you to government family law resources, legal aid services, and legal information in your province or territory. In addition, Justice Canada has produced some excellent resources for parents and children, including:

- *Making Plans: A Guide to Parenting Arrangements After Separation or Divorce*
- *Parenting Plan Tool*

- *Parenting Plan Checklist*
- *What Happens Next? Information for Kids About Separation and Divorce*
- *What Happens Next? Calendar for Kids to Keep Track of Important Dates When Your Parents Split Up*
- *The Federal Child Support Guidelines: Step-by-Step*
- *Inventory of Government-Based Family Justice Services* (updated annually, this resource connects you to relevant services and resources near you)

To find this information, use your search engine and type in the words "Justice Canada Family Law." Once you are on the Family Law webpage, you can search the site, looking for tabs that match your interests, such as "publications, child support, family justice services" or "custody and parenting."

Legal information. In addition to the legal information provided by Justice Canada and your province or territory's family justice services, Public Legal Education and Information Organizations (PLEIs) are also a good source of information. Located in each province and territory, PLEIs offer free legal information for the general public, including family law information specific to your province or territory.

To locate the PLEI in your area, type in "PLEI in (add name of your province or territory)."

Lawyer referrals and legal advice. If you need help finding a lawyer in your area who specializes in family law, your province or territory may have a lawyer referral service that can help you find one. Using your search engine, type in "lawyer referral services in (add your city)" or try "lawyer referral services in (add your province or territory)." Some referral services charge a small fee for the initial consultation

service, while others are free of charge. You can also use your search engine to look for "family law lawyers in (add your town or closest city)."

Another option is to contact your province or territory's Law Society. Just type in "Law Society of (add the name of your province or territory)."

When choosing a lawyer, talk to potential family law lawyers about their style to see if they are a good fit for you. For example, some lawyers focus their practice on mediation, negotiation and taking a collaborative approach to resolving issues.

... I WANT TO CONNECT WITH FAMILY LAW SERVICES IN MY PROVINCE OR TERRITORY

A wide variety of family justice services are provided by your province or territory. These services, including mediation, parent education programs and child or spousal support assistance, may help you get information and resolve issues without going to court. Some family justice services are listed in the "Family Law" section of the Government of Canada website. More services may be listed on the website of your provincial or territorial government.

... I CAN'T AFFORD LEGAL SERVICES

Legal aid promotes access to **justice** for economically disadvantaged persons. To find out if you are eligible for legal aid services, contact the province or territory's legal aid office nearest you. If this search doesn't work, try searching for "Legal Aid in (add name of your province or territory)."

... I WANT RECOMMENDATIONS ON BOOKS OR ARTICLES ON PARENTING AFTER SEPARATION, STEPPARENTING, BLENDED FAMILIES, OR OTHER TOPICS

If your province conducts parenting after separation courses, they are a good way to find out about other trustworthy sources of information on topics of interest to you.

Another way to find out about good books, articles or websites on topics related to parenting children after separation is to use your search engine, typing in words such as "best books (or articles) on parenting after separation or divorce, on stepparenting, on blended families, on children and divorce," etc. If your search locates books that have been reviewed by experts or readers, taking the time to read the reviews may help determine if any of these books are right for you.

You also can ask your local librarian for assistance on choosing some good books that meet your specific needs or interests.

... I WANT RECOMMENDATIONS ON BOOKS OR WEBSITES THAT ARE APPROPRIATE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Fortunately, there are a number of excellent resources for children and youth related to their parents' separation. Some of the books have become classics, while other resources are newer and even interactive. To begin your search, look at the resources for children and youth available on the British Columbia Internet site called *Families Change* and Justice Canada's resource for Children called *What Happens Next?* (see box ***An Internet Site You'll Want to Know About***). Sesame Street offers excellent resources for children from the ages of 2 to 8. To learn

more about their resources and watch short videos on the topic, search for "Sesame Street, divorce."

To find other books or web-based resources for children of all ages, search the Internet for "best books for children on divorce" or consult with a children's librarian.

... ONE PARENT IS MOVING AWAY. WHAT SHOULD I DO?

Justice Canada's resource *Making Plans: A Guide to Parenting Arrangements After Separation or Divorce* contains some helpful information about what to do when one parent wants to move away.

Using your search engine, type in "Making Plans: A Guide to Parenting Arrangements After Separation," Justice Canada. Once you open or download the document, look at the table of contents for the topic "When one parent wants to move away," found under the section called "Special Issues."

... I'M LOOKING FOR MORE GENERAL INFORMATION ON ADULT AND CHILD HEALTH, MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

- The Canadian Paediatric Society's (CPS) Internet site for parents called *Caring for Kids* provides information developed by paediatricians on topics from growing and learning, behaviour and parenting, to teen health.
- The Canadian Mental Health Association's Internet site provides downloadable brochures on various mental health issues, including on children, youth and depression; feeling angry; getting help; grieving; mental health for life; and stress.

- The Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development's Internet site includes a comprehensive online encyclopedia of topics on early childhood development. Once on the site, find and click on the tab "Early Childhood A–Z." This online encyclopedia includes topics such as attachment, resilience, and parenting skills related to separation and divorce.

... MY FAMILY IS EXPERIENCING VIOLENCE

The best place to start is with Justice Canada's Internet site on Family Violence. Using your search engine, type in "Justice Canada, Family Violence." Then click on the tab "Family Violence." This comprehensive section contains information on:

- learning more about family violence
- getting help with family violence
- finding available government resources (at all levels)
- age-appropriate information for children and youth
  - for ages 10 to 12
  - for ages 13 and up

Search this Internet site until you find or are linked to the information and assistance you need. In an emergency, call 9-1-1.

Use your search engine, type in the words

and find more resources!

Notes

Because life goes on ...
Because we are called to
Respond to its challenges
Because we best see the light
With our eyes wide open.