

PARENTING DURING SEPARATION

Marital separation and divorce is usually a highly emotional time for parents, and it may be difficult to think objectively or maintain perspective about the needs of children. During the acute phase of separation and divorce, there are a number of questions to ask parents that will help minimize anxiety in the children:

- To which parent do you think your child is closest?
- What are your strengths as a parent?
- What are your weaknesses as a parent?
- Do you think shared parenting would work for your situation, and why?
- How do you expect visitations to be handled if you are given primary physical responsibility?
- How would you expect visitations to be handled if you are not the primary custodial parent?
- On what items are you willing to negotiate?
- What other people will be in your child's environment if you have primary physical responsibility?
- How does your child like to be comforted?
- What are your child's fears?
- Who are your child's teachers, and what grades did your child receive on his last school report?
- Who are your child's friends, and what do you know about their families?
- What kind of discipline works best with your child?

During the acute crisis of a parental separation, parents can take steps to minimize their children's anxiety. The guiding principles for communicating with children are honesty, objectivity, and sensitivity. It is preferable if both parents can together tell the children what is happening.

Here are some recommendations for communicating with children during the early stages of separation and divorce:

- Prepare the children by carefully telling the children *before* a separation. A few days to two weeks is the minimum appropriate notice. Parents should do this together if possible. Showing your feelings, such as sadness, is okay, but

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rationality, maturity, clarity, honesty, and courage should guide the communication.

- Tell all the children at the same time, as they can help each other cope with the news. If there is a wide age range, tell them together, and then follow up with separate discussions at each child's level. One way to present this would be: "We married fully hoping and expecting to love each other forever, but we have discovered that one (or both) of us is unhappy. One (or both) of us does not love the other anymore. We fight with each other. We want to stop the fighting and restore peace."
- Keep your children informed of all major changes and developments.
- Reassure your children that you love them, and take steps to maintain the bond.
- Give your children permission to love both parents.
- Provide appropriate support systems. This may involve therapy with a mental-health professional or counseling in school, extracurricular activities, and social opportunities.