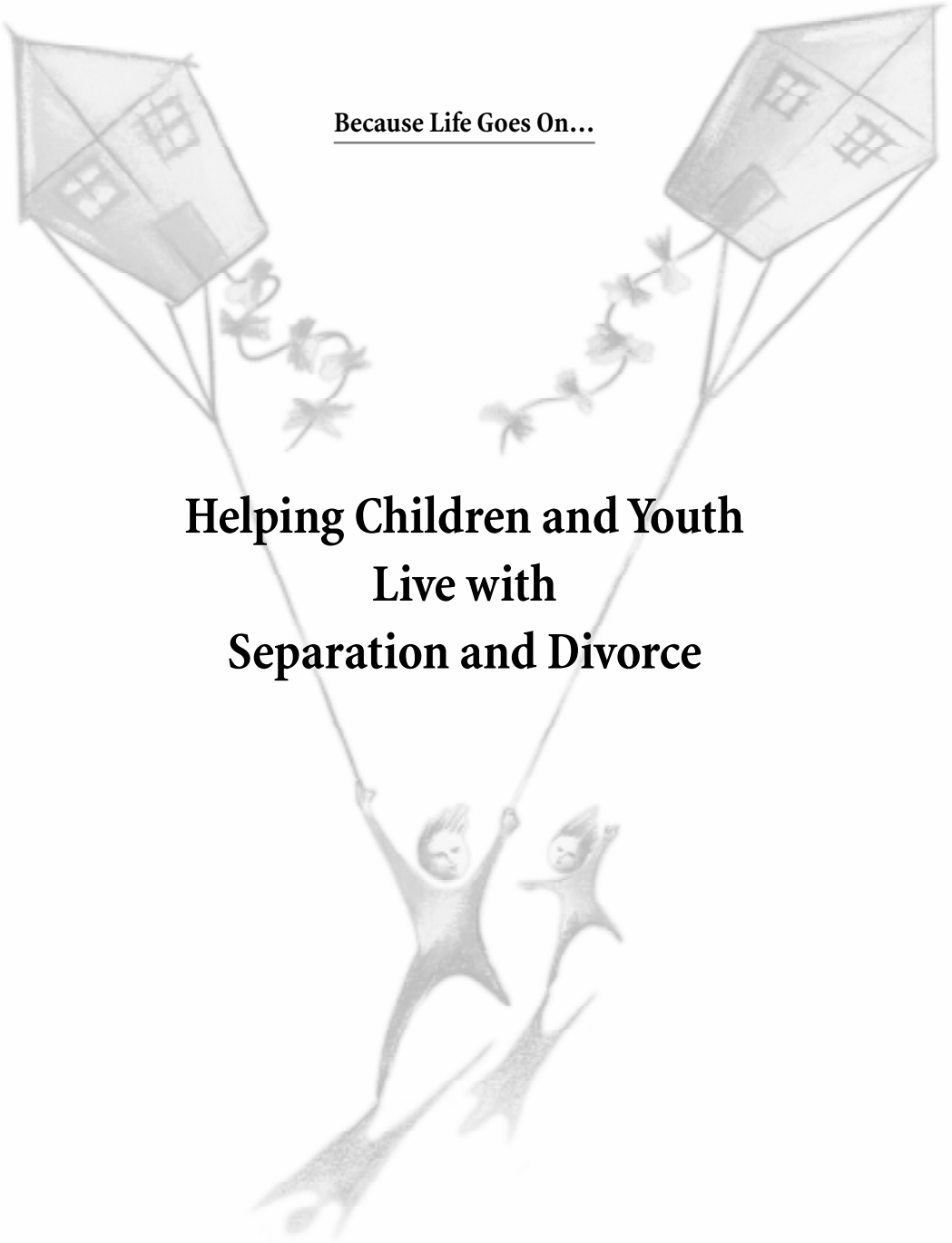


Because Life Goes On...

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

A Guide for Parents



Our mission is to help the people of Canada
maintain and improve their health.

Health Canada

Également disponible en français sous le titre
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Health Canada is very proud to provide this 3rd edition of *“Because Life Goes On...”* in response to an overwhelming demand from Canadian families and professionals. Although the core content of the booklet has remained the same, certain sections have been updated to better address some of the current issues related to separation and divorce.

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Table of Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Introduction | 1 |
| SECTION 1 | |
| Parenting Through Separation and Divorce | 4 |
| Knowing What to Expect | 4 |
| New Challenges | 5 |
| Getting Help and Building a Support Network | 6 |
| Helping Yourself Helps Your Children | 9 |
| SECTION 2 | |
| Helping Children at Every Age | 10 |
| Looking at Divorce Through the Eyes of Your Child | 10 |
| Talking to Your Children About Your Separation and Divorce | 12 |
| <i>Communicating Effectively with Children, Pre-teens</i> <i>and Teenagers</i> | <i>14</i> |
| Maintaining Your Child's Community of Support | 17 |
| <i>What Parents Can Do to Help Children at Any Age</i> | <i>18</i> |
| When to Get Help for Yourself and Your Child | 19 |
| SECTION 3 | |
| Parenting Is Forever: Developing a Cooperative Parenting Relationship | 23 |
| Protecting Children from Parental Conflict | 23 |
| Allowing Children to Have a Relationship with Both Parents | 24 |
| Building a Cooperative Parenting Relationship: Providing Your Children with Nurturing, Security and Stability | 25 |
| <i>What Is Family Mediation?</i> | <i>27</i> |
| SECTION 4 | |
| A Child's Age and Stage of Development Make a Difference | 29 |
| Infants and Toddlers (Birth–2 years) | 30 |
| Preschoolers (3–5 years) | 32 |
| Early Elementary School Children (6–8 years) | 36 |
| Pre-teens (9–12 years) | 40 |
| Teenagers (13–17 years) | 43 |



SECTION 5

Parenting After Separation and Divorce 48

- Helping Children Adjust to Two Homes 48
 - When You Live Apart from Your Children* 49
- When Parents Start Dating 50
 - Sexual Orientation and Divorce* 52
- Remarriage and Blended Families 53
- Because Life Goes On... 55

SECTION 6

Resources 56

How Can I Locate Information and Resources? 56

- Making Use of Community Organizations 56
- Making Use of Municipal Services 60
- Accessing Provincial Services and Organizations 60
- Government of Canada and National Voluntary Organizations: They're Closer Than You Think 62

What Do I Do When...? 64

- ... I Need to Find Quality Child Care in My Community 64
- ... I Have Financial Needs 65
- ... I Want to Learn More About Family Mediation Services 66
- ... I Need Legal Information and Services 67
- ... My Family Is Experiencing Violence 69
- ... I Would Like to Find Out About Support (Self-Help)
 - Groups in My Community 71
 - ... We're Considering Marital Reconciliation 72

Books and Videos for Parents, Children and Youth 72

- Books for Parents 72
- Books for Children and Youth 74
- Videos for Parents, Children and Youth 75

Introduction

“HOW WILL THIS affect the kids?” is one of the first questions that goes through the mind of every parent facing the end of a relationship. The answers are as diverse as children themselves. Every child reacts to separation or divorce in his or her own way.

But even though every child is unique, there are needs and feelings that most children share. This booklet will help you understand those common reactions. With this knowledge, you will be better prepared to help your children cope, adapt and move forward.

We all know that divorce is tough on kids, both during and afterwards. But how you handle the separation and divorce can make a huge difference in how well your children adapt. Studies in child development and psychology show that children and youth adapt better if you:

- try to anticipate and understand your children’s feelings, and do your best to help them feel safe, loved and secure
- help your children express their feelings — children of any age cope better when they feel they are being heard
- separate your spousal relationship (which has ended) from your role as parents (which goes on)
- protect your children from conflict between you and the other parent
- help your children keep a close relationship with both of you.

These are not easy tasks — especially during a time of emotional upheaval. But no one knows your child better than you do, and no one is in a better position to provide your child with security, routine, comfort and support. The love and safety you provide for your children during this stressful time will serve them for the rest of their lives.

There is no such thing as a perfect parent or an ideal family. Being a good parent doesn’t mean having all the answers or solving every problem. It means demonstrating love and concern and helping children



and youth understand and cope with their feelings. It means providing a safe and nurturing environment, and fostering a child's sense of trust and self-esteem.

Good parenting during separation and divorce is similar to parenting at other times. But just when children need extra attention and reassurance, your capacity may be reduced because of the stress of ending a spousal relationship. It's hard to "be there" for your kids when your own emotions are in turmoil.

The end of a spousal relationship is a very stressful and demanding time. Just as there are many times in life — such as the birth of a child or death of a parent — when some additional support or guidance can make all the difference, parents facing divorce will benefit from reaching out for the support and assistance they need.

All families, however, will benefit from taking advantage of community services and support networks. The "Resources" section will direct you to information and people who can help. If your family is dealing with violence, addiction or abandonment, locate professional guidance and support as soon as possible.

How This Booklet Is Organized

Because Life Goes On... is designed to provide parents and other adults with general information and suggestions. It also includes up-to-date resources and organizations available in your community and across Canada that can provide you with information, support and services.

Every family's experience with separation and divorce is different. There is no "typical" divorce and no "magic formula" for helping children deal with the process. The information in this booklet is not intended to fit every situation — some suggestions may apply and some may not. Use your judgement based on your family's unique situation.

The booklet is organized into six sections — each section builds on information contained before it, although you can easily jump to or read only those sections that meet your most immediate needs.

Section 1, *Parenting Through Separation and Divorce*, focuses on some of the challenges that you may face as you go through the process of separation and divorce, and how you can build a support network to help yourself manage better.

Section 2, *Helping Children at Every Age*, provides information on the stresses and challenges that children of all ages face during separation and divorce, and gives suggestions on how you can help your children adapt.

Section 3, *Parenting Is Forever: Developing a Cooperative Parenting Relationship*, outlines some of the key tasks for parents: to protect your children from adult conflict; to enable your children to have positive relationships with both parents; and to provide your children with nurturing, security and stability.

Section 4, *A Child's Age and Stage of Development Make a Difference*, is organized according to developmental stages — from infancy to adolescence. Although all children, pre-teens and adolescents share many of the same developmental goals and needs — such as a deep need to trust other people and their world — their particular age and stage of development are major factors in determining their reaction to any situation and how you can meet their needs.

Section 5, *Parenting After Separation and Divorce*, looks at some of the opportunities and challenges that children and their parents face as they go on with their lives. Old relationships change and new relationships develop. This section focuses on helping children adjust to two homes, to new parental relationships, and to remarriage and blended families.

Section 6, *Resources*, offers practical information on how and where to get support, assistance and information. No one should have to do it alone. Fortunately, there are resources available to help parents and children alike with their immediate and long-term needs. Whether you call a local agency, borrow a book from the library, or surf the Web, this section is designed to help you get the support you need.



Parenting Through Separation and Divorce

DIVORCE CAN BE such a painful experience that many parents find it difficult to respond to the needs of their children just when they need extra emotional support and attention. To help your children cope with divorce, you need to learn to manage your own feelings and new circumstances. This section focuses on some of the challenges that you may face as you go through the process of separation and divorce, and how you can build a support network to help yourself manage better. Like many other parents in similar circumstances, you can move on and help your children move on too.

Knowing What to Expect

Divorce is not a single event, but a process that unfolds over time. It involves a series of family changes and reorganizations that may take several years. The events and emotions that accompany these changes cannot be dealt with overnight. It takes time for everyone in the family to adapt.

Separation and divorce can be an emotional roller coaster. You may experience feelings of anger, isolation, anxiety, euphoria, depression, guilt, loss of control, fear, incompetence and insecurity. You may doubt your ability to deal with the needs of your children because you also face pressing needs of your own. Sometimes parents may feel that they

have failed their children, and may doubt their own worth. These emotions and difficulties are a natural part of getting through separation and divorce.

New Challenges

There is no doubt that the process of separation and divorce is one of the most difficult experiences in an adult's life — socially, emotionally and financially. Most parents are ill-prepared for all of the challenges and adjustments they may face, including:

- Changing homes, neighbourhoods and schools, which may lead to a sense of instability and the loss of relationships and support systems.
- Economic changes — two households cost more to maintain than one. Some parents may face a sudden financial crisis. (See page 65 for information on how to get financial assistance.)
- Difficulty in concentrating on your job. Or you may immerse yourself in work, especially if you are no longer living with your children.
- If you are not living with your children, you may feel as if you've been cut off from their lives.
- You may have increased demands and responsibilities if you have the major role in caring for the children. It may seem that you don't have enough hours in the day to spend time with your children, and still find any time for yourself.

It's not surprising that with all the pressures of divorce, parents are under even greater stress. That's why it's so important for you to carve out some time to take care of your own needs. Try to schedule time for activities that help you get in touch with yourself, whether through a hobby, physical activity or simply relaxing quietly. Allowing yourself occasions to break away from the momentum of “doing” and simply “be”, even for a few minutes, will help you regain your balance. It will give you a better sense of perspective and will help you stay on top of the day-to-day stress of work, children, and the separation or divorce.

Here are a few suggestions for activities to treat yourself to:

- take a walk
- photograph flowers
- enjoy a long soaky bath
- sing in a choir
- ...

Getting Help and Building a Support Network

All of us need “emotional” support as well as “practical” support. Family and friends, support groups, professionals, as well as other support services in your community, can all help you adjust to the changes in your life. It is important to reach out for advice, encouragement and understanding to help reduce tension and the feelings of isolation and depression that often go along with separation and divorce.

Also, by reaching out to other adults, you are teaching your children a very valuable lesson in life: we all need help from time to time, and learning from — and leaning on — others is an important part of living and growing.

Personal and Family Support

Most parents rely on outside support at one time or another.

- **Family and Friends** — Separated and divorced parents, especially those who live with their children, are often so busy with their child’s day-to-day needs that they may neglect relationships with close family members and friends. Yet these people are the best allies you may have. They listen, give you a chance to enjoy the company of other adults, and help you get organized. They can become role models or sympathetic adults for your children. Family and friends can offer something crucial — compassion and understanding. Time alone with family and friends can help you get used to a new lifestyle.

- **Health Care Professionals** — Your family doctor, your children’s paediatrician, or the staff at a community health centre are an important resource when you or your children are experiencing difficulties. They also can recommend other professionals or services available in the community.
- **Support Groups** — Many community centres and organizations offer support groups where people in the process of separation or divorce can talk about their feelings and experiences. Since parents often face similar problems, others in this situation can be a source of great comfort and inspiration.
- **Professional Counsellors** — If depression, anger or loneliness interfere with your work, home tasks or parenting, professional counselling from social workers, counsellors, psychologists or psychiatrists may help.

If you are still considering ways to stay together, talking to an experienced marriage counsellor could be beneficial. A marriage counsellor can help you take steps to resolve conflicts, remedy past grievances and improve your relationship.

- **Family Mediators** — Family mediators can help parents resolve their disputes and develop a coparenting arrangement out of court. For more information on family mediation, see pages 27–28 and 66–67.
- **Community Resources** — There may be other resources in your community to help with your family’s physical, emotional and social needs.
- **Family Service Agencies** provide a range of services, including family life counselling, educational programs, family violence prevention and intervention, and credit counselling and referrals.
- **Other Organizations and Services**, such as family- and youth-serving organizations, family resource programs, local religious congregations and community information and referral services can provide support, or help you find the help you need.



- **Local Libraries** have books, magazines, audio-visuals and Internet access on a range of helpful topics. Ask the librarian for assistance.

See pages 56 to 59 to locate these and other community resources.

Legal Support

The decisions that parents make during the process of separation and divorce are important and have long-term consequences. Family law is complicated, and everyone benefits from sound legal advice in this situation. There are a lot of family lawyers in Canada who can inform you of your rights and responsibilities. How much you must rely on your lawyer depends on your individual situation and on how you decide to approach it. See pages 67 to 69 for information on how to find a lawyer, apply for legal aid and obtain pamphlets about family law, the Federal Child Support Guidelines and other related issues.

Getting Immediate Help

If you are feeling “out of control,” extremely depressed, or involved in child or spousal abuse, don’t delay getting help. Some people or services to contact include:

- distress (help) lines (refer to the front page of your telephone book)
- hospital emergency departments
- shelters for abused women (phone numbers are often listed in the front pages of the telephone book)
- 911, police, fire or ambulance (refer to the front page of the phone book).

Helping Yourself Helps Your Children

Reaching out for support for your personal needs during separation and divorce will make you better able to respond to the needs of your children. Knowing more about how children, at each stage and age of development, experience separation and divorce will help too. The next section describes some of the feelings children and youth commonly experience as their parents divorce, and how you can help them adapt to the changes involved and move forward in their growth and development.



Helping Children at Every Age

Looking at Divorce Through the Eyes of Your Child

Younger Children

It's important to keep in mind that however you as an adult understand or experience the situation, your children see and experience it differently.

No matter what their age, children have a limited ability to understand what is happening during a divorce, what they are feeling, and why. That doesn't stop them, however, from trying to figure out "the big picture." Younger children see things from their own perspective, that is, they see themselves as the cause of events. This 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," many children say to themselves. They may imagine that their parents will walk out the door and never come back. Too afraid to tell anyone, they believe they are the only one in the world who feels this way.

Most children 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 develop a profound bond and a deep sense of loyalty to both parents.

Because children first learn and build their sense of self by watching and interacting with their parents, those children who witness parental arguing often experience it as though 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. Just because they argued with a sibling or friend, that didn't make Mom or Dad leave. So why would Mom or Dad move out just because they have been arguing? Children do not understand why an argument would cause one of their parents to leave.

When parents continually argue, their children get caught in the middle. They worry about having to take sides and about pleasing both parents — a very heavy burden for a child.

Pre-teens 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, pre-teens 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, pre-teens 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 anger is common to all children, just as it is to adults. But children, pre-teens and teenagers express it differently. As a basic human feeling, the experience of pain is at the heart of anger.

“They would fight a lot and I was really young, and I didn't really know what was happening and so I would think it was my fault. And I would sit in my room and not know what to do. And I always thought that maybe it was my fault.”

LAUREN, 13



Talking to Your Children About Your Separation and Divorce

Talking to your children about your separation and divorce is often the hardest and most emotional step in the process, yet how parents handle this crucial step can set the pattern for future discussions and influence the level of trust children feel in the future.

Telling your children that you are separating or getting a divorce will trigger a variety of responses that can vary from confusion, fear and sadness to anger, guilt and shock. Your children will want to know that you will not abandon them, physically and emotionally.

Take the time to handle this process thoughtfully and carefully. In particular, create a safe environment for these discussions with your children. For example, if there's too much conflict between parents, it's best for only one parent to explain what's going on. Here are some practical suggestions:

- 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 are 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, 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.
- Avoid waiting until the last moment. Contrary to popular belief, delay will not protect children from anxiety.
- 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. In other words, separation and divorce is an adult problem: "Mom and Dad 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."

- Plan what to say ahead of time. Above all else, be genuine. Depending on the circumstances, here are some messages that may be useful:
 - "Separation is a grown-up problem and you are not to blame. It is our problem and we will work it out."
 - "I/we know it seems unfair that these problems cause you pain and unhappiness. I/we wish things were different, too, but they're not, and 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."
 - "I/we want you to say what you feel and think. You may feel worried, angry and hurt. I/we understand because adults often have these same feelings too."

Give your children lots of opportunities to ask questions and share their thoughts and feelings. 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 digest information. Be prepared to revisit the discussion and let them know that you are willing to talk about things as often as they need or want to.

Some children will have suspected a separation. 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 strained or difficult family life may have been. Parents need to be patient with an unhappy child or youth.

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, pre-teens and teenagers will

*Helping children
at every age*

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.

You may be surprised by how much grief your children experience after hearing news of the separation. 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 usually 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 can also cause us to become defensive and closed to others.

Communicating Effectively with Children, Pre-teens 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, writing and building. 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 and with your 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 giving them appropriate choices so they don’t always feel powerless. 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.

Practice 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.

Communicate directly with pre-teens and teenagers. Pre-teens 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 — just as you would. It is usually best to be direct with pre-teens and teenagers, and avoid giving lectures or disguising the point. But remember, you know your own children better than anyone. Use your judgement.

Pre-teens and teenagers want to have a say about the things they see as important. Although communication is not always



easy with teenagers, you can provide opportunities for them to express their thoughts and feelings. Their 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 going to bed at reasonable time is not negotiable.

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

Maintaining 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 in contact with, and influence them almost every day in their young lives.

Grandparents and other members of the extended family are very important for children, especially if they have already established a close relationship. 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. Pre-teens and teenagers, in particular, need regular contact with their friends, from talking on the telephone to spending time together at school and social activities.

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 Parents Can Do to Help Children at Any 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, don't argue in front of them).
- Don't involve children in adult problems.
- Allow your child to express his or her feelings.
- Play with children. Play is literally the "work" of childhood. 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.
- 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.

"There's a lot of odd feelings. Feelings you never had before. Everyone says it's not your fault but you wonder sometimes."

ANDREW, 14

When to Get Help for Yourself and Your Child

Some situations require professional help. It is important for you, as a parent, to reach out for help when you are having trouble coping with additional demands, when you're dealing with violence or addictions, or when your child is in distress. Schools may have counsellors on staff or visiting psychologists or social workers. Parents and teachers should not hesitate to use them as a source of advice and information. For more information on where to obtain professional help, see the "Resources" section at the end of this booklet.

Violence in the Home

Separation and divorce can increase the likelihood of violence in the home, even in families where it has not occurred in the past. For women and children leaving an abusive home, the period after separation is often a time when the violence escalates. It is important for victims to find a safe place to stay and to develop a comprehensive plan to help them remain out of danger. A shelter for abused women can help you during this transition period.

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.

*Helping children
at every age*

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 assaulted themselves, children who are exposed to violence are emotionally abused. They 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 battered 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.

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

- assure them that you love them;
- tell them as much as you can without name calling;
- listen to their feelings, assure them that these feelings are okay, and share some of your own feelings;
- don't be afraid to 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;
- be clear with them that no one deserves to be abused, and that violence of any kind is not acceptable; and
- let them know that you also have needs to have friends and to spend some time alone.

All parents should become familiar with signs of child abuse. Parents should seek help if their children have been abused or if they suspect abuse. Contact the local child welfare agency or seek advice at a family resource centre. Even if children have not themselves been assaulted, children exposed to violence in the family may need help. Counselling and support for you and your children can help all of you deal with this difficult situation. Refer to page 69 of the “Resources” section for specific information on where to get support and information.

Remember that you have made positive choices for you and your children. Credit yourself for your courage and strength.

A Child Who Experiences Abandonment

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 children only rarely, and the parent who slowly drifts out of the child’s life over time.

Children who are abandoned by a parent may face significant problems. A child who is abandoned often feels an overwhelming sense of rejection. The thought that one parent no longer loves her, wants her, or even cares about her is potentially devastating to self-esteem and the future ability to form healthy, loving relationships. A child who has been abandoned may develop an intense yearning for the absent parent — a longing that can interfere with development.

Children who have been abandoned need to be assured that:

- they did nothing to cause the parent to leave
- they are very much loved and lovable
- adults sometimes have a hard time relating to others, and may do the wrong thing as a result.

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 Child in Distress

Children often react to stress by falling back on behaviours they have outgrown. But when this behaviour continues over time, or when your child is clearly not coping, it's time to get help.

There are some warning signs that a child is in trouble: anxiety, sadness and depression, eating or sleeping disorders, school problems, overly aggressive behaviour, alcohol or drug abuse, isolation from family and friends, and other unusual, persistent problems. It's always a good idea to seek help if you notice that a problem is persisting over time or getting worse. 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 can expect that these natural behaviours may increase. However, if the behaviour persists or you are worried about it, you might want to discuss this with your family doctor.

If your child refuses to spend time with or see his other parent, this behaviour is telling you something important. Since children don't have the same tools as adults to deal with conflict and pain, they may react by shutting out one parent. Both the child and parent need each other to work through their feelings. Because a child's reluctance to interact with a parent may get worse and may interfere with his or her healthy emotional development, counselling is recommended.

For more detailed information, see "A Child's Age and Stage of Development Make a Difference." To locate community resources that can help you and your child, see the "Resources" section.