

To Cope with Parents Living Apart, Children Need...

Love

Children measure how much parents love them by how much contact they have with each parent. Contact every day or every week with a parent feels like lots of love. No contact at all feels like no love at all. Have frequent contact with your children — in person, on the phone, and through the mail. Children's biggest fear is being abandoned and they worry "if one parent can leave the other, maybe both parents can leave me." Children wonder "if one parent has stopped loving the other, will they stop loving me?"

Children need to hear parents will be OK and parents will always take care of them — no matter what. Children need to know their parents will ALWAYS love them because the love parents have for their children is different from the love parents had for each other. Let your children know "PARENTS ARE FOREVER."

Reassurance

Children need to know they did not cause the problems between their parents. Children's second biggest fear is that they caused the conflict or separation or divorce or that a parent left because of something the child did (or didn't do). Be sure to tell your children the conflict or separation or divorce is not their fault.

This fear is greater if parents disagree about when the children should be with dad and when they should be with mom. When parents fight about their children, children naturally believe they are to blame for their parents not getting along.

Predictability

Children's third biggest fear is 'what will happen to me?' They want to know: "where will I live?," "which school will I go to?," "when will I be with dad?," "when will I be with mom?," "what about sports?," "will I be in the same scout or 4-H group?," and so on. When the family life is changed by divorce, the child's sense of security is shaken. Children need to know who will take care of them and which parent is ON-DUTY at which times. As soon as both parents agree, both parents together should tell children where they will live, sleep, go to school, and when they will be with each parent, their brothers and sisters, their friends, and relatives.

Remember, children under age 7 need a fairly rigid routine in order to have predictability. More flexible arrangements often feel like chaos to young children.

Continuity

When big changes happen, children do best when some things in their life stay the same. Reducing the number of changes for children helps give them continuity and stability. At the time of separation or divorce (or any other BIG change), if children can remain in the same home, or the same neighborhood, or go to the same school, or go to the same childcare, or attend the same church, or have the same friends, or go to the same after-school activities...it helps them cope. Of course, everything can't stay the same—that's the nature of divorce, but keeping some things the same for children really helps.

Permission to Love Both Parents

Children need to know it is alright for them to love both parents even if their parents don't love each other. Children benefit when parents encourage the relationship between their children and the other parent.

Self-image and self-esteem are made up from what children know about their parents. They have been told all their lives they are like their parents...'you have your father's curly, thick hair,' 'you have

your mother's sense of humor,' 'you have your father's charm,' 'you have your mother's eyes.' When children hear bad things about their parents...the divorce is one parent's fault or one is a jerk or one drinks too much or one is a lazy bum, children believe these messages are true about themselves also.

Make sure your children can be proud of both their parents and hear good things about their parents. All parents make mistakes. Even if you believe the other parent IS a jerk, it causes unnecessary harm to tell children. Children feel defensive when someone criticizes their mom or dad. Children are stuck in the middle of having to choose sides when they hear negative things about their parents. Remember, even if you no longer love the other parent, your children love both of you and it hurts them to hear bad things about someone they love.

Respect

Even when parents disagree with their children, responsive parents respect their children, their children's feelings, interests, and opinions. Responsive parents listen to their children without giving advice. When children are hurt or angry or scared or sad, parents may be uncomfortable and wish they were happy instead. Children need to be told their feelings are normal and OK. Don't make the mistake some parents do when they argue about feelings: 'there's nothing to feel sad about' or 'don't worry' or 'don't be angry.' Don't try to fix feelings. Parents build a strong sense of worth in children by listening and soothing children when they feel sad or lonely or scared.

My children know I love them because:

- I tell them I love them.
- We have a regular schedule of contact each week.
- I support them financially.
- I attend their sports activities.
- I go to their school events and parent teacher conferences.
- I spend one-on-one time with each child each week.
- I help them with their homework.
- I cook meals for them.
- I listen to them without giving solutions or advice at least once a week.
- I don't normally plan other activities when they are scheduled to be with me.
- I don't make promises to them I can't keep.
- I don't break promises I make to them.
- I play games or read with them.
- I am interested in them, their friends, their hobbies, their sports.

My children know they did not cause the problems between their mom/dad and I because:

- We tell them our problems are grown-up problems and they didn't cause them.

- Both parents attend our children's special events just like we always have.
- We tell them we will always love them and they haven't done anything to cause the problems between us.
- We tell them even though we are living apart, we love them and will be with them often and regularly.

My children have predictability in their lives because:

- The calendar at each home lets them know what will be happening and which parent is ON-DUTY each day.
- They know in advance how they will spend holidays each year.
- The other parent and I follow similar routines at each home for our children under age 6.
- Their scheduled activities are put on the calendar at both homes.
- We follow a regular schedule for them to be with each parent.
- I don't plan activities for them when the other parent is ON-DUTY.

My children have continuity and stability in their lives because:

- They attend the same school they attended last year.
- They have some of the same friends they had last year.
- They attend the same youth group they attended last year.
- They live in the same home they lived in last year.
- They have regular contact with both parents.
- They live in the same neighborhood they lived in last year.
- Their parents attend their special events the same as before.
- They are on the same sports teams they were on last year.
- They go to the same child care provider as last year.
- Some of the rules at home are the same.

My children know it is really OK for them to love and care about their other parent because:

- I rarely say anything negative about their other parent.
- I don't blame problems on their other parent.
- I am not jealous when my children have a good time with their other parent.

- I don't compete with the other parent for my children's attention.
- I don't act happy or agree with my children when they complain about their other parent.
- I don't act hurt or sad when my children want to be with their other parent.
- I don't schedule activities for my children on their other parent's time with them.
- It is 'no big deal' to mention the other parent around me.
- I don't let others talk negatively about my children's other parent in front of my children.

My children know I respect them because:

- We can disagree with each other without being angry.
- I focus on their strengths – not only on their weaknesses.
- I listen, but I don't try to solve their problems for them.
- I can accept they have their own opinions (even when I disagree).
- I can accept their choices about...(depends on age) their hairstyles, earrings, clothing, classes, room decor, spending their allowance or income, food.
- I don't make fun of them (if they are not laughing, it isn't funny).
- I don't call them names (idiot, clumsy, chicken, crybaby).
- I don't put down their ideas or comments (how stupid!, you'll never be big enough to play football!)