

Helping Your Children through Separation and Divorce

By Liana Lowenstein, MSW

Divorce is stressful for children, but there are things you can do to help your child during this time of change and loss.

- 1) Give your child a simple but honest explanation about the separation or divorce so they understand it was not their fault. If possible, no matter how painful, try to tell them when the whole family is together (including both spouses and all children).
- 2) Be available to listen. Accept their feelings (most typically sadness, anger, guilt) and remind them that their feelings and reactions are normal. Use words that invite more, such as, "Tell me more about that," or "What was that like?" Help your child be open with you by saying: "You can tell me anything and I won't be mad at you no matter what."
- 3) Reassure your child early and often that your divorce is not his or her fault.
- 4) Tell your child you love him or her. Children may believe that, because their parents stop loving each other, they may also someday stop loving their children.
- 5) Don't punish or reprimand immature behavior. Children of all ages who feel stressed may act babyish for a period of time, i.e. baby-talking, bed-wetting, or thumb-sucking. They need extra comfort and affection during this time.
- 6) Set up a regular visitation schedule. Children feel most secure when they know when and for how long the visitation will occur.
- 7) Even if you live far away from your child, regular contact by phone, email, or via video computer is important to let your child know you care about him or her.
- 8) Divorce is a time of change for both you and your child. Try to minimize these changes. For example, try to keep your child in the same school and home if possible, as well as the same afternoon and evening activities.
- 9) Use consistent rules and routines. For example, try to agree with the other parent what TV programs are permitted, what bedtime is appropriate, how misbehavior is handled, etc. Write down and exchange this agreed-upon list of rules and routines.
- 10) Don't feel you need to provide special toys, treats, or outings at each visit. Children need normal family time in both parents' homes.
- 11) Don't argue or fight with your ex-spouse while the child is listening. Experts say the amount of conflict children witness during and after divorce is a crucial factor in their adjustment. If you are having difficulty keeping the conflict to a minimum, please get help!
- 12) Don't criticize your ex-spouse in front of your child. Remember that your ex-spouse is still your child's parent; when you criticize your ex-spouse, you harm your child.

- 13) Don't use the child as a messenger to deliver information to the other parent.
- 14) Don't use your child to get revenge on the other parent by denying child support or visitation.
- 15) Don't use your child as a spy to find out what the other parent is doing.
- 16) Don't make your child take sides in any dispute with the other parent. Children generally want to make both their parents happy. Don't make them choose.
- 17) When you and your child do talk about the other parent, be neutral and supportive of that relationship.
- 18) Praise your child often. Parents in the midst of divorce are often distracted and miss opportunities to acknowledge their child's positive behavior.
- 19) Spend special time with your child. Your child needs you more now than ever. Try to spend at least fifteen minutes a day of uninterrupted one-on-one time with your child.
- 20) Do not introduce your children to potential partners until you are in a serious committed relationship. It has been shown that children exposed to numerous partners of a parent have difficulty establishing lasting committed relationships as adults, as attachment issues are disturbed.
- 21) Take responsibility for your own behavior. You cannot change or control your ex-spouse's behavior, but you can change and control yourself.
- 22) Take care of yourself. The better you take care of yourself, the better you can care for your child. Reach out for all the support that is around you: relatives, friends, support groups, etc.

About The Author

Liana Lowenstein, MSW, is a Registered Social Worker and a Certified Child Psychotherapist in Toronto, specializing in the treatment of traumatized children and their families. She has authored numerous books that include *Creative Interventions for Troubled Children and Youth*, *More Creative Interventions for Troubled Children and Youth*, *Creative Interventions for Bereaved Children*, and *Creative Interventions for Children of Divorce*. She is a clinical supervisor and consultant, and a sought-after international speaker. Contact the author: (Tel) 416-575-7836 (Email) liana@globalserve.net (Web) www.lianalowenstein.com