

Life Balance

Healthy matters to keep in mind.

September 2008

Breaking Up is Hard to Do:

Helping the Whole Family Adjust to Divorce

If you're experiencing the life-altering process of divorce, you are not alone. The U.S. Census Bureau reports that about half of all first marriages end in divorce. A substantial number of these divorces involve children.

Divorce is considered one of the most stressful events you can go through, ranking just behind the death of a loved one and the onset of serious illness. It often involves a change in residence, loss of income, alterations in family routine or a sense of failure. Parents have the added priority of helping their children cope with the news while they themselves are hurting.

If you are going through a divorce, remember that as a parent, you have a lot to do with how your family adjusts to divorce.

Help Children Cope

Keep in mind that the level and quantity of information you share with your child should be based on his/her age and level of maturity. No matter how old, all children need love and security, and to know that their feelings will be taken seriously.

Make it a habit to reassure your children that you still love them. Encourage them to share their questions and any feelings they may have about the divorce. Let them know it's okay to feel sad or angry.

Likewise, provide as much consistency and routine as possible. This will give your children a sense of security and help to ease fears of abandonment.

Remember, your child does not have the maturity to understand the complexity of adult relationships. Never speak badly about your former spouse in front of your children. Avoid using your children as a way of communicating with your former spouse about child support payments, custody issues or visitation. This can hurt your children and put them in awkward situations.

Help Yourself

Many parents have found that creating a Parenting Plan as part of the divorce can help lessen or avoid conflicts later. Elements of the plan can include provisions for custody, child support, and handling of vacations and birthdays. A Parenting Agreement is a legally binding contract that helps to ensure that children will grow up in a stable environment. It also encourages parents to work together amicably. This type of agreement is so useful and effective, many states have made them mandatory. Using this kind of tool may greatly reduce stress in the lives of all family members.

Divorce is a major life change and, like all major changes, it can test our limits. If you're struggling with a separation or divorce, seek professional support. Asking for help is never a sign of weakness or failure, especially in situations too difficult to handle alone. UBH is here to help. Call or log on anytime for help with any of life's challenges.

Tips for Feeling Less Alone

- **Maintain boundaries.** Don't depend on your children for support. Children can become scared if they feel a parent can't take care of him or herself.
- **Join a single parent group.** This may help you share feelings, socialize and learn from others who've gone through a similar experience.
- **Use your network.** Connect with adult friends and family members. Make arrangements in advance to call a particular person when you need to talk.
- **Seek professional support.** During trying times, reach out for support from a counselor.

Breaking the News

By sharing the news with care and compassion, you begin your family's healing process. Here are some tips.

- Break the news to your children together, if at all possible.
- Choose a day when you can spend some extended time as a family.
- It's important that no blame be assigned to either parent for the separation. Children see themselves as being made up of both parents. Labeling a parent as "bad" or "wrong" says to the child, "you are bad" or "you are wrong."
- Children need to hear that they are not to blame for the divorce; almost all children feel that they are responsible.
- Parents must explain that the divorce is between themselves — parents and children never divorce.
- Older children may want to know how the divorce will affect them: Where will they live? Will they have to change schools? How often will they see mom or dad? If you don't have all the answers, be honest that you're not sure at this time. But tell the children that they can continue to ask questions in order to keep a dialogue going — this will help you to know how they are handling the news.
- Never put your children in a position to have to choose sides.

Resources

SEAP

Call toll-free

(800) 692-7459

(800) 824-4306 TDD

or log on to

www.liveandworkwell.com

access code: Pennsylvania

Use the search phrase “divorce” to learn more about coping with the stress and change.

The information and therapeutic approaches in this article are provided for educational purposes only and are not meant to be used in place of professional clinical consultations for individual health needs. Certain treatments may not be covered in some benefit plans. Check your health plan regarding your coverage of services.