

**A guide for divorcing parents:**

**How to help your  
children through  
separation and  
divorce.**



This information booklet has been created and provided to you by:

**Fairway**  
Divorce Solutions®

**Changing the Way Divorce Happens™**

## **If you think divorce is tough, imagine what your kids are feeling**

Transitioning through a separation and divorce is one of life's most stressful events. No one gets married expecting this to happen. You are likely filled with a roller coaster of emotion, denial, anger, sadness, fear, anxiety and uncertainty about the future. You may or may not have chosen this path, but know there are experts and information out there to help you along the way. There are many conversations and decisions in the road ahead. This resource booklet has been created to help parents educate themselves and provide tools to help their children transition through this change with the least amount of stress as possible.

This booklet is divided into 5 key areas for separating and divorcing parents:

- **Demystifying the terminology around separation**
- **Talking to children about separation**
- **Creating a child-focused parenting plan**
- **Helping children transition to two houses**
- **Paving the way for better post-separation communication**



# Demystifying some of the terminology around separation and children

**Separation Agreement.** The separation agreement is the legal document that captures the decisions people have made in terms of their finances and their children. When there are children under the age of 18, a parenting plan needs to be developed. This plan will also become part of the legal separation agreement. The separation agreement also outlines the finances of the separation.

**Parenting Plan.** This is a detailed plan that describes how parents are going to care for and make decisions regarding their children. The younger the children, the more detail should be included in the plan. This plan serves as an ongoing guide for their decisions, but also can assist the parents in the future should they disagree on a matter regarding their children.

**Custody.** Custody is all about who has the **right** to make decisions about the children including: education, religion, medical, where the children live, extra-curricular activities, childcare, travel. Custody is NOT about the schedule and with whom the children live and when. That part of a parenting plan is the child's schedule. Many people have "joint decision-making/custody" of their children even if the children live primarily with one parent.

**Children's Schedule.** The schedule is all about the **division of time** with each parent. Some children spend a relatively equal amount of time with both parents. We call that shared or equal parenting. Sometimes this equal division of time is not possible due to a variety of circumstances (shift work may not permit, ages of the children). The goal of the schedule is to focus on the best interest of the children while at the same time ensuring the children have the opportunity to develop healthy relationships with both parents.

## Note:

Many people choose to work with a family mediator to assist them in developing the Parenting Plan (and the finances). The mediator guides the parents through discussions about their children and facilitates resolution should the parents not agree. If there are any safety concerns, you should contact a family lawyer.



## Talking to children about separation

**Telling your children about the decision to separate is a conversation that needs to be carefully planned. Although there is no *one* answer to the question: “*when should we tell the children*”, below are some tips and recommended language to consider.**

- **If possible, tell them with both parents present**

This is important because the children may blame the parent who is not present. When children see their parents together to have this conversation, it sends them the message that both are still their parents and that is not going to change. They can see you are working together to help them through it.

- **Try to keep the information about the relationship general (avoid sharing all the details with your children)**

It’s essential that children *not* know all the details of why the separation happened as this confuses them. Telling children that adult relationships are complicated, and that: “*We have decided we will live in different houses,*” may be enough.

- **Provide lots of assurance**

Children need to hear that they are not to blame for the separation and that you love them. If you have your parenting plan, share the schedule with them (calendars are very helpful tools for young children). If you haven’t got details of the new parenting plan yet, assure them that you are working together with professionals to make sure they will get to spend time with both parents.

Sometimes children will ask if they will go to the same school or if they will have to move. If you are having financial difficulties, try not to make promises about this. It’s better to tell them you don’t know at this point (unless you are absolutely sure). Promise them you will keep them informed of what is happening when you know more. Their sense of security and comfort comes from *knowing you are ok*. Reassure them about routines where you can. For example, “*Dad will continue to take you to hockey, that isn’t going to change*” can be very reassuring.

- **Older children may need to be told separately**

If you have more than one child and there is a big age difference, you may consider telling the children separately. Older children often have more questions and it may not be appropriate to answer those questions in front of younger children. Be sure to have a plan for when information will be shared with your older children. Today’s teens post messages on Facebook and Twitter on an hourly basis. You’ll want to talk to your teen about

allowing you the time to tell grandparents, friends or other relatives if you don't want relatives to hear through Social Media networks. Don't confide in older children about the relationship problems. Be sure to seek out a personal or network of support for yourself.

### The do's and don't's of telling children about your separation

1. **Don't say:** "Daddy doesn't love mom anymore or mom doesn't love dad anymore."

Children may interpret this as: love is something you stop doing. "If they stopped loving each other, will they stop loving me?"

**Instead, try:** "We don't love each other in the same way married people should love each other." Or "Sometimes moms and dads have problems and they can't fix them so they decide they are going to live in different houses."

2. **Don't say:** "Mommy is leaving us," or "daddy is leaving us". Although it may feel that way if one person does not want the separation, you never want to give your children the message that their parent is leaving them. Children are often filled with uncertainty and fear, especially during the early days. Even words like break up and split leave children feeling very anxious and afraid.

**Instead try:** "We are going to live in different houses. And we are going to make sure you get to spend time in both homes."

3. **Don't say:** "Who would you like to live with?" While it is important to check in and see how the kids are adjusting to their new scheduling, asking them whom they want to live with is a lose-lose question for a child. Children write about how that question puts them in the middle and they feel torn because they know someone will get hurt. Parents should make these decisions.

**Instead try:** "We wanted to check in to see how the schedule is working from your perspective? What is challenging for you? What can we do to help?"

### Other Tips:

Counselling can be very helpful for children, particularly in the early transition. Consider seeking additional support for them and even for yourselves. Some parents even continue counselling during the transition so they can help their children through this. This can be one of the greatest benefits during the early days of separation.

### Suggested reading

*It's not your fault Ko-Ko Bear* by Vicky Lansky

*Was it the chocolate pudding* by Lawrence and Marc Brown

## Creating a child-focused parenting plan

One of the most challenging aspects of the parenting plan is the children's schedule. It is hard to imagine sharing time or not being able to be with your children all the time. Many times there is a feeling of loss of control. Remember decision-making and children's schedules are two different things. So how do we create a child-focused schedule? Some children do spend relatively equal amounts of time in both houses, some don't. It's up to the parents to make the decisions based on the *needs* of their children, not the *wants* of the parents. For example, if one parent starts work at 6 am, it might not be doable for younger children to sleep over at that parent's house on school nights. No matter if the time is equal or not, there are many factors to consider when developing the schedule. Working with a trained family mediator or counsellor can help you work through those details. There are very specific age-appropriate schedules that have been developed by child experts for the purposes of parenting plans. The child's developmental stage, temperament and ability to deal with change are the most important factors in considering the schedule.

- Very young (pre-language) children generally need a graduated schedule. If a baby is still nursing, then overnights with the father may not be possible. Shorter/frequent amounts of time will help the baby continue to bond. A graduated schedule is more desirable moving to longer stretches of time as the child develops language skills and sense of self.
- Younger children need more frequent contact with both parents. Pre-school children and toddlers will need a carefully designed schedule in order to ensure their sense of security. Trying to ensure there are no more than 3 sleeps between each house is essential for healthy attachment and bonding to occur. Parents may choose to practice shorter transitions in the beginning and evaluating how things are going before moving to longer stretches.
- School-aged children need consistency in their schedule. Being careful to ensure the same thing is happening on the same school night will help your children adjust. You don't want your grade 3 child wondering: *"It's Tuesday, am I going to dad's after school or mom's?"* Don't set it up that your children have to calculate the rotation because then they are not listening to the teacher. Some children sleep at both parent's house on school nights, some don't. Either way, try keeping the same routines each week. And remember, children shouldn't *'commute'* to school. Making a commitment to live within reasonable proximity of the school is an essential part of a shared parenting arrangement.

- Upper elementary and teenage children may like an alternate week schedule. Research recommends that this alternate week should be reserved for older children. Teens talk about liking the “*settling in*” aspect of the alternating week. Transitioning either on a Friday night or Sunday allows the children to settle in on a non-school day. Some parents will schedule a mid-week dinner to allow them to stay connected during their off week.

### Suggested reading

*It's not the end of the world* by Judy Blume

*Difficult Questions Kids Ask (and are afraid to ask) About Divorce* by Meg F. Schneider and Joan Zuckerberg

Many times parents who decide that a shared division of time is not possible are worried they will lose connection with their children. The truth is, if equal overnights are not possible, there is very little difference in the number of hours or time you spend with your children. For example, suppose you agree to alternate weekends and Tuesday and Thursday evenings. The children can't sleep over at your house during the school week because you start work at 6 am. If you think about it, after your evening time with the kids, they are asleep so no one is spending time with them. When your children are grown they will not be saying “*I only got to sleep at my mom's or dad's on Friday, Saturdays.*” Instead you will hear them say “*Remember when we went to that cottage and there was a big storm*” or “*I always remember that my parents never missed a soccer game.*” Children don't think in terms of percentages or number of days. Maximizing quality time together is the key. And the quality of your relationship is up to you!



# Helping children transition to two houses

You've finally worked out all of the details of your separation. The agreement is being finalized and now it's moving time. Whether one parent is keeping the matrimonial home or if both are moving, this transition can be delicate and difficult for children. As adults, we can easily get caught up in the business of the move and forget how this might be affecting our children. Keep these strategies in mind in helping children understand and adjust to 'the move':

- 1. Communicate ahead of time.** It's important for children to understand the timing of the move. In fact, if you can prepare them ahead of time, then they'll have time to ask any questions that might be bothering them. Imagine the shock of telling children on a Friday that mom or dad is moving tomorrow. Even if they knew the separation was happening, it takes time to prepare for the reality that mom and dad are going to be living in different houses.
- 2. Information is key.** There's a saying that "*if you don't say anything, they'll make it up.*" Try not to leave children in the dark. So while taking young children house shopping may not be a good idea (it could set up a false sense of hope), showing them the new house ahead of time (once you know the deal is sealed), can be very helpful. Children like to visualize what mom or dad's new house will be like and more importantly, will find security in knowing about their new room.
- 3. Plan ahead.** Asking children to think about what things they might want to take to their new room can really provide a sense of security for them and a sense of ownership. If both parents want an item/piece of furniture to be at their house, consider buying a second one. For example, one family decided to buy a second set of identical bunk beds so their twin boys would feel at home at dad's new house.
- 4. Give them permission to be excited.** One mom decided she wanted to be sure that the children knew it was ok to be excited about dad's new house. They discussed it ahead of time, and she helped the kids pack some of their favourite toys. Then they all went to dad's new house to help them set up their rooms. Another family purchased a second video game system for dad's house as a joint house-warming gift for their teenage boys.
- 5. Reassure them often.** When the move happens – help your children through the transition by giving them the confidence that you believe they will be ok. This is not to say that the first few nights at the new house are always easy,

## Suggested reading

*Two Homes* by Claire Masurel

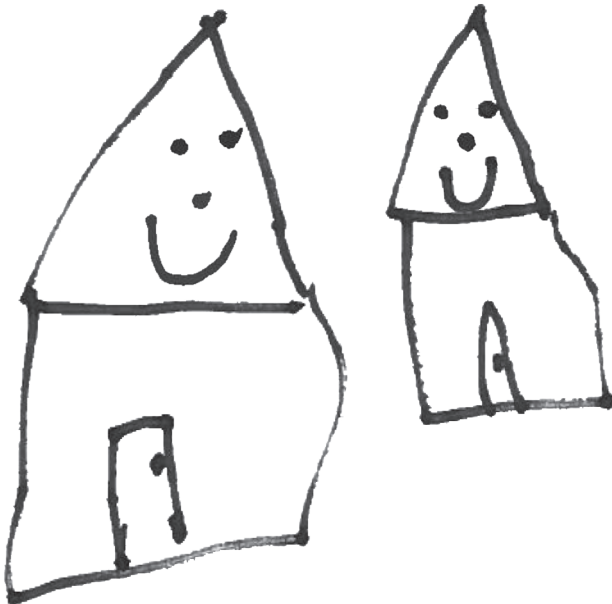
*Mom's house, Dad's house: making two homes for your child*  
by Isolina Ricci



but with the right frame of mind and positive outlook, it doesn't have to have a long-term emotional impact on your kids.

Younger children may refer to the marital house as 'home' and that may be hard on the other parent. Remember it takes time to adjust to any new situation. One family decided to call dad to come to mom's new house on the first night to tuck the children in because they were missing 'home'. Mom talked about how putting their needs ahead of her ego really allowed her to put the children first (*"I feel like they need dad right now because this is so new,"* rather than *"I want them to like my new house and they need to get used to it"*). And sure enough, before long, they did in fact adjust to the new situation.

Allowing children to connect with the other parent can provide children with the security they need, especially in the early days of a move. Helping them feel safe to ask to talk to mom or dad is so important. You don't want to make them feel guilty about wanting to talk to the other parent. Remember they love and need you both. One strategy you might find very helpful is when the children want to talk to the other parent, text message the other parent to make sure it's a good time to talk. Then the children aren't disappointed if the other parent isn't home or doesn't answer.



# Paving the way for better post-separation communication

While the separation is complete and the move has happened, the truth is, parenting is a life long commitment. Now begins the task of navigating a new relationship with your former spouse. You will need to continue to communicate with one another post-separation if you have joint decision making/custody, so it's time to consider a new path forward. If you thought communication was a challenge when you were married, it isn't going to get easier once you are separated unless you do something differently. Many people fall into old patterns of communication: buttons get pushed and conversations get emotional and then escalate. The #1 factor that determines how children will cope with divorce long term is exposure to parental conflict. The more difficult the communication between mom and dad, the harder it is on the children. You have to love your kids more than you dislike your ex so that they know the separation has nothing to do with them. It can be very hard to do sometimes, unless you can shift your perspective about the situation.

Here are some tips:

- **Separate the parenting role from the marriage.** While it is absolutely understandable that dealing with the emotions of the separation will take time; the truth is, the children have nothing to do with this. Being able to separate these two pieces can be very challenging but are essential for the children's well-being.
- **Consider this new relationship in a more business-like fashion.** Setting up meeting times at a coffee shop with a clear agenda of what is needed to discuss (hockey registration, tournament driving, fundraising lead) has been a very effective strategy for many.
- **Give advance notice on what you need to discuss.** This helps everyone be more prepared and will help keep the conversation on topic. One couple agreed to text one another to set up a phone call at a mutually agreed upon time and limit each call to 20 minutes. That way if they didn't finish what needed to be discussed, they would re-book another time. Spontaneously calling your ex may not set the conversation up for success.
- **Give as much notice as you can when requesting changes.** We live in a very busy world where we juggle many demands on our time. Don't assume the other parent will always be able to accommodate a schedule change, so the more notice you can give, the easier it will be to make back-up arrangements.
- **Ask don't tell.** If you are requesting a change in the schedule, be sure to ask and give reasons why. *"I would like to switch weekends as next weekend is my nephew's birthday, is that ok*

## Suggested reading

*The truth about children and divorce*  
by Robert Emery

*with you?"* goes a long way in re-establishing positive communication. Remember, the easier you make it on each other, the easier you make it on your children. Being flexible with your ex means next time **you** need something you are more likely to receive that same courtesy.

- **Establishing a communication plan.** Creating the ground rules of (what, how, when) you communicate can be very helpful. A counsellor or mediator can help coach you through this. Discussing things like when and how to request schedule changes, summer vacation planning, PD days, medical appointments and emergencies will form part of your communication plan. Spending a little bit of time determining your communication plan can save you a lot of stress in the future. Most of all, it will help your children know that although mom and dad are not living in the same house anymore, you are still their parents and are taking care of them.

Separation and divorce is difficult. It is even more challenging when there are children involved. Remember that it's not separation and divorce that has a long term impact on children, it's how parents move through this transition. The greatest gift you can give your children is the gift of working together to continue to raise them, even if you are living in different houses. There are professionals who can help you navigate these challenges so that you can be your best self for the future.

**Colette Fortin is owner and mediator of Fairway Divorce Solutions® serving South Western Ontario. She has been featured on many talk shows and in several magazines as the Region's expert on divorce mediation and parenting through divorce.**

**Illustrations by Isabelle Tomin-Brown**



*The greatest gift you can  
give your children is the  
gift of getting along,  
so they never feel  
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had anything  
to do with  
them.*

**Helping people transition through separation  
and divorce with dignity, optimism and hope.**

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