

INFORMATION FOR PARENTS TO ASSIST CHILDREN IN
SEPARATION AND DIVORCE

This information has been developed by the Family Service Workers of Dufferin Child and Family Services and Dr. Greg Finlayson as consulting psychologist to provide information to parents struggling in situations of separation and divorce. It is intended this information will help you understand your child or adolescent's behaviour, so you can support them through this very difficult process.

How Stress Affects the Brain

- The 'emotional' part of the brain develops first before our thinking abilities
- We always have the tendency to react emotionally before our thinking kicks in when the emotions or feelings in a situation are strong enough
- When we're upset or stressed, our brain produces stress hormones, but other parts of our brain send out hormones to counteract the stress hormones and calm us down
- When children are under repeated stress – such as hearing or seeing their parents arguing or fighting – their brain *loses the ability to calm itself* – like an over-stretched elastic, or a piece of metal repeatedly bent becomes brittle
- Repeated stress causes changes in the way the brain develops, and these changes are not always reversible
- When this happens for children they become *hypersensitive* to parents' moods and behaviour, and *hyper-alert* to any upset
- They will then *over-react* to situations they could easily handle if their brains had not become over-stressed or overwhelmed having to cope with more stress hormones than their young and developing brains were meant to
- Because children do not have adult thinking abilities (and won't until later adolescence), they do not have the skills to understand what is happening, and if young enough, do not have the ability to put things into words and tell you what's going on with them
- Children act out through their behaviour what they do not understand
- Some will show disruptive behaviour and get into problems at home, in school, and in the community; some will become withdrawn into themselves; all may have problems with sleep and with learning, because their young brains are in a constant state of *alarm*

Signs and Symptoms of Stress in Infants, Children and Adolescents include:**Infants**

- Some stop being as responsive or seem to withdraw from contact
- It might be harder to soothe them when they are upset
- Even infants may become aggressive

Children

- Look for signs that learning is being affected (problems concentrating and increased distractibility, lower work quality, not getting work finished, poorer printing/handwriting,
- Behaviour: increasingly oppositional-defiant, such as arguing, refusing, not doing what asked; regression, such as being unable to do things they could before; bedwetting/soiling; some are actually overly-compliant and seem passive, lack of 'spark'; some become overly sensitive; withdrawn behaviour/not participating in activities; look for changes in peer relations, especially if they are connecting with children you are concerned about; see if their social skills have changed in bad ways (such as rude, demanding, or 'giving attitude')
- Delays in development (e.g., speech; self-care, such as getting themselves through daily routines)

Adolescents

- Signs of possible drug and alcohol use
- Beginning or increased sexual behaviour
- Getting into abusive relationships, or being abusive themselves
- Excessive reliance on peers and need to spend too much time with them; other changes in peer relationships
- Loss of interest and participation in activities they enjoy, including withdrawal to their rooms or from the family
- Changes in school behaviour and performance (not going to class or to school, not doing assignments, messages of concern from teachers, suspensions)
- Problems with the police and courts
- Breaking rules at home they previously followed (curfew, doing what they are asked, increase in 'giving attitude')

- Changes in mental health, such as signs of depression, suicidal statements or behaviour

Checklists to Assist in Identifying Problems

Cooperative Parenting Checklist (www.lfcc.on.ca) Attached

Building Resilience and Supporting Your Children and Teenagers

- Focus on what is under your control rather than what your ex-partner or spouse is or is not doing
- Realize that when you criticize or put down the other parent you are actually doing the same to your child or teenager, since they are 'half of each' of you
- To do well and adjust to the change in family, it is essential to recognize that children and teenagers need a healthy relationship with **both** parents, unless one is demonstrably abusive
- They need your permission to accept and like the other parent's new partner or spouse, so it is essential not to let them hear negatives about that person, or to encourage disrespect or disobedience
- Realize that children see and understand more than we think they do

Do's and Don'ts:

Do:

- step back and take a deep breath when frustrated and tempted to say something hurtful to your child or adolescent about them or the other parent;
- create calendars to let kids know what is happening and when;
- communicate with the other parent directly by phone, texting, email, a third party if necessary;
- in general, create appropriate boundaries;
- assure children they are loved by both their parents;
- exercise caution and timing regarding introducing the children to a new partner or 'friend' (the mistake is in doing it too soon);
- recognize the rules, values and expectations will not be the same in both homes, and kids can adjust to the differences with help and support;

- recognize children and teenagers need time to adjust to the new 'reality' of their family;
- assure children they are still loved by both parents, even though their parents have changed their feelings for each other;
- remember that children are not pieces of furniture to be fought over;
- for the sake of your children and adolescents, take the 'high road' when tempted to respond in kind to upsetting behaviour in dealing with the other parent;
- stop blaming the other person, and instead look at how your behaviour is keeping the cycle of anger and hurt going; and,
- realize that what happens now, and how this is handled, affect children's ability to develop and keep healthy relationships in their future

Don't:

- Use the children to pass messages to the other parent;
- criticize the other parent in front of the children;
- argue in front of the children or over the phone where they can overhear;
- share legal documents and information from the legal process, including information about finances; or,
- 'pump' the children for information about the other home and the people there

If you can't do the "do's" or stop doing the "don'ts", it is time to get help for yourself for the sake of your children and their adjustment to the reality of their new life

Resources

- Philip M. Stahl, *Parenting After Divorce: Resolving Conflicts and Meeting Your Children's Needs (Second Edition, 2007)*, Impact Publishers, Atascadero, California (ISBN-13: 978-1-886230-84-2); includes other books and resources for children of different ages, and for parents in divorce and separation
- Marc Brown and Laurie Krasny Brown, *Dinosaurs Divorce: A Guide for Changing Families*; (Paperback, amazon.ca \$8.99); for children 4 to 8 years of age
- Don Gordon, *The Effects of Divorce on Children: Protecting Children Before and After Divorce, 2003*; to find, search "Children in the Middle" for this PDF file

- Websites: Centre for Children and Families in the Justice System (www.lfcc.on.ca); www.parentbooks.ca; www.aamft.org/families/consumer_updates/childrenanddivorce.asp

For more specific information on how stress affects the developing brain:

- www.childtrauma.org (the work of Dr. Bruce Perry)
- B. Bryan Post, *From Fear to Love: Parenting Difficult Adopted Children*, www.postinstitute.com, March 2010

Local Resources

- *The Talk-In Clinic*, Dufferin Child and Family Services; Tuesdays from 1:00pm to 8pm, last appointment 7:00pm, no appointment necessary; meet with a clinician with the Children's Mental Health Service (for more information, 519-941-1530 or www.dcafs.on.ca)
- *Family Transition Place*; a variety of programs, including workshops for women, children and men; 519-941-HELP, or www.familytransitionplace.ca
- *Dufferin Parent Support Network*; 519-940-8678, or www.dpsn.ca

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