

# **Child and Family Centre**

*Dr Caleb Knight*

**Educational Psychologist**

**2206 Technology Plaza**

**651 King's Road**

**Quarry Bay, Hong Kong**

**Tel: 2543-0993 Fax: 2543-0996**

**Email: [cknight77hk@yahoo.com](mailto:cknight77hk@yahoo.com)**

**[www.childandfamilycentre.com.hk](http://www.childandfamilycentre.com.hk)**

## **CHILDREN AND DIVORCE**

### **Guidelines for Parents**

- Telling children about the divorce  
If possible, both parents should deliver the message to children. Be honest and discuss the situation at a level that is appropriate to the child's age. Tell them as much as appropriate about the reasons for the divorce and when the separation might take place. Try to make the children understand that it is not their fault. Children will likely have questions about where they and both parents might be living, when will they see the other parent, whether they will move to another house etc. Try to deliver as much information as possible at the time and keep in mind that uncertainty will likely cause anxiety for the child. Try to establish as soon as possible what living arrangements will be and how visits will be scheduled.

With young children parents are sometimes under the impression that they are not able to understand and perceive what is actually going on. In fact, young children can be very sensitive to their parents' mood and emotional state especially if there is any kind of tension or change in the household. Avoid open conflict or arguing in front of the children. When you discuss the logistics of the divorce such as living arrangements, financial arrangements and especially any custody issues about the children, do so in a private place where they cannot hear you. This goes with phone conversations as well. It is vitally important that the children are given the message that the parents' separation or divorce is not their fault. Keep open lines of communication with your children and make sure that they know you are available to discuss their feelings about the matter whenever the need arises.

In the early stages of separation or divorce parents may be living together in the same house. This can present with particular difficulty as the parents may not want to be spending any time or even seeing each other on a regular basis. When this is the case, parents need to make an extra effort to be civil and congenial with each other and demonstrate to the child that they are able to get along despite the divorce. Parents should work out a consistent visitation and activity schedule with the children. Keep in mind that your children will be feeling very anxious and uncertain about their future especially in the early stages. This makes it all the more important to have parents spending time with their children that is consistent

and expected. Short frequent visits are acceptable with the parent who is not likely to be the primary caregiver but they should not be away from the primary caregiver for too long. Long separations from primary caregiver may result in the child becoming depressed, anxious and displaying behavioural difficulties. When transitions are made from one parent to other, they should be planned in advance. The schedule should be kept by both parents. It is important to keep uncertainty for the child to an absolute minimum. If you make plans with your child to do something make sure it has been agreed in advance by both parents and make every effort to be punctual and show up. Sudden changes or just not showing up cause anxiety and uncertainty.

Most parents will see some behavioural change in their children especially in the early stages of divorce or separation. This could include bedwetting, symptoms of separation anxiety and in some cases tantrums and aggression. In typically developing children these symptoms will get better as time wears on and the tension between parents as well as the living situation become established.

The sooner that parents can establish two separate residents for the children the better it will be for them in the long run. When the separate residents are established, be sure there is a place at the non custodial parent's house where the children have some space of their own. In the beginning these transitions can be very stressful even though the children have close relationships with both parents. The parent who has moved out should note any undue anxiety that the children may have about leaving their primary home. Give them time to adjust to their new surroundings. If the children seem upset or sad about it, talk about it with your ex-spouse. If necessary, you might need to temporarily cut back on the length of stay in the beginning. Be sensitive to the issue as in the long term laying a firm support of ground work towards establishing a trusting relationship and getting them slowly used to your new home will be better for everyone in the long run. In the beginning young children may be very anxious about leaving their primary home and caregiver. The length of visits might need to be shortened or consideration given to adding an extra short visit in order to reduce the stress while at the same time helping the child bond to their other parent. To help children adjust, it is important to be supportive of their relationship with their other parent. They should be encouraged to visit and engage in activities with their non custodial parent. Make sure you are not giving them any subtle (or not subtle) messages that it is fine for them to miss a visit or stop seeing their other parent.

The parent who has primary care and control of the children is usually determined by many of the following:

Who spends the majority of time with the children; Who provides the meals; Who holds and comforts the children most often; Who changes most of the diapers; Who dresses and bathes the children; Who plays with the children; Who takes the children to the doctor; Who stays home with the children when they are sick; Who reads stories to the children; Who takes the children to school or activities; Who puts the children to sleep and Who could communicates most closely with the children.

To summarise, some of the most important factors are:

Eliminating open conflict or any discussion about divorce or other logistical matters involving custody, finances etc. in front of or anywhere the children might hear; Establishing a consistent living situation that is free from tension as soon as possible; Reducing anxiety and uncertainty about when the children will see parents and engage in activities with them and keeping to a consistent schedule; Avoiding any type of negative talk about your spouse in front of your children; Making sure you do not use your children to give messages to your spouse; Being supportive and encouraging the relationship that your child has with the non custodial parent.