

- Not having a child choose between their parents. Focus on building strong, close relationships with both parents, if possible.
- Making sure the child regularly gets more attention from each parent. The pamphlet “Child-Led Play” works well with pre-schoolers and has some ideas for parents to try.
- Giving the child permission to enjoy her visit to her other parent, and reassuring the child that the parent will be there when she returns (for example, “Have a great time and I will see you when you get back.”).
- Giving the child pictures and videotapes of the other parent to help maintain the connection.
- Keeping in frequent contact with the parent who is no longer in the home. This can help with a sense of security. How long the visits are is not as important. The length of contact can be increased as the child gets older.
- Planning supportive and consistent childcare.

Children need extra patience and on-going positive experiences to help them adjust to separation and divorce. Conflict and custody disputes between parents are the main factors in negative outcomes for children later in their lives. Parents may need to get mediation to help them co-parent. Separation and divorce are not one-time events. Even with support, your child will not forget that it happened. As your child grows, she may show her emotional reactions to the separation/divorce in other ways.

Books for Children about Separation and Divorce

When Mom and Dad Divorce by Emily Menendez-Aponte

Families by Tax and Hafner

Mom & Dad Don't Live Together Anymore by Gary Hunt

Dinosaurs Divorce: A Guide for Changing Families by Brown and Brown

If you have questions or concerns, please call Access Mental Health at 403-943-1500 or your family doctor.

This material is for information purposes only. It should not be used in place of medical advice, instruction, and/or treatment. If you have questions, speak with your doctor or appropriate healthcare provider.

Separation and Divorce: Helping Young Children Cope

How do we help infants to pre-schoolers (birth to 5 years) deal with separation and divorce?

Separation and divorce affect children of all ages. Even for a very young child, it means that his or her world has changed. When parents separate or divorce they need to lessen the negative impact on their children and help them to cope with the change.

- Young children sense the emotional state of their parents, but do not have words to share how they interpret this. Parents may have less time for their child.
- Parents that are always in conflict cause their children to feel very sad.
- Changes in routines are very unsettling for infants and toddlers.
- Pre-schoolers have limited ability to understand separation and divorce. Their immature thinking may make them believe they caused the problems.
- Pre-schoolers find it hard to tell the difference between reality and fantasy. They may feel they can fix the problems, but are frustrated when that does not happen.

- Young children may have fears of being abandoned, being unloved, or being punished for their behaviour or feelings. They also have a strong desire to have their parents get back together.
- Pre-schoolers may worry about the absent parent if the contact is less often than every 3–4 days.

What are some behaviours that may mean a child is having trouble with the separation or divorce?

Parents may see:

- problems with sleeping and eating
- fearfulness, mood changes, more fussy, demanding more attention
- increased aggression and anger, more temper tantrums
- child is talking less
- trouble with social relationships
- sadness or withdrawing from situations
- children going back to behaviours from an earlier level of development as a way of coping (for example, wanting the parent to feed and dress them or needing diapers again)
- infants and toddlers becoming upset when the parent who cares for them the most leaves, even for short periods

How can we help the young child cope with separation and divorce?

Early childhood is a very important stage of development for children. They need responsive, sensitive caregiving and a secure relationship with their caregivers.

Research shows that, in the case of separation and divorce, doing the following has better outcomes for children.

- Preparing the child ahead of time for the separation and divorce.
- Working to increase the child's sense of security and maintain routines.
- Soothing words, hugs and kisses are a must!
- Repeating reassurances are a must—"I'm not going to leave you.", "I'll be here."
- Helping them express their feelings, fears and fantasies when they are old enough. Using age-appropriate books to help talk about feelings.
- Not letting a quiet, obedient child start taking care of the parent.
- Not using punishment when the child shows anger.
- Protecting the child from conflict in the relationship with both parents.