

Advice for Separating Couples

NOTES to HELP COUPLES who are SEPARATING

EACH PARENT

Have a photograph of children – Use when communicating with each other.
REMEMBER THE LOVE FOR YOUR CHILDREN



- Use “time-frame” for separation – Use as a signpost in time so that decisions that have long-term consequences can be clearly thought through.
- **Stick to time-frame:** don’t separate and then change that decision because you’re lonely. Nor should you change the decision and definitely leave each other if you really agree with each other. Stick to the original time frame!!
- **Don’t enter any other relationship** (sexual, emotional) **for at least 12 months** (the period you need to “grieve” the death of a marriage / relationship) even if you decide to go your own separate way.
- **Don’t denigrate** your ex-partners to your children.
- Be **honest when responding to your children**. This includes telling them things that they will be distressed to hear (eg. “Your mummy and I are going to separate!”).
- **Don’t hide** things from them (whilst at the same time, don’t **give them inappropriate information**).
- **Don’t give children information that “blames” the other parent**. Don’t lie to children (and what you say needs to be age-appropriate), but if one partner has betrayed the other, it is okay for the betrayed parent to say that the other parent has “hurt” him/her, and that s/he can’t trust the other parent, rather than say: “Your father/mother is a worm/who#e because he/she has had sex with...” **The children need to have some understanding about the fact that the parents are separating and that lack of trust and hurt are the reasons** rather than just blame. The breach of trust or hurt was to the partner and should not automatically be plugged with the parenting relationship.
- **Answer children’s questions honestly and appropriately**. This includes difficult questions such as: “Are you and daddy going to divorce?” If the adults have decided, then they should be honest with their children; if however they want to reassess after a period of time, then they should say, “We haven’t decided yet. But at the end of the year daddy and I will discuss it and as soon as we decide, we’ll tell you what we decide.”
- Make sure you tell your children what is happening so that your **children know they can trust you**, and that they don’t have to be hyper vigilant.
- Be **honest and direct with your ex-partner**. Don’t hide things that they need to know. Treat your ex-partner just as you would like to be treated.
- The Therapist will **help the parents realise that there is a grieving process** for each – including the children.
- Explore with parents how they would **advise extended family and other important people** of the separation.
- The Therapist can also help the parents think about **how the children will tell meaningful people** (teachers, peers, coaches, family members etc) in their lives about their parents’ separation.
- The Therapist can help parents **consider appropriate accommodation for children** in house where parent moves. Consider how to provide a firm, stable environment for children so that the trauma of separation can be minimized and children can feel secure that parents are in charge and can look after the children.

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Financial Property Settlement

Put children first! Use their photograph to help parents to focus

- Use lawyer/accountants if need to (advice, understandings etc) but each to let ex-partner know what s/he is doing so that trust can be established. If possible see people regarding finances together.
- Also, the therapist will do their best to see if both parents can discuss and come up with a “good-enough” agreement regarding the child's needs and financial support. That is the best option. If this is not possible, then see a counsellor/therapist or mediator. If this is not workable then use lawyers, but make sure you each make the decisions, using the advice of lawyers & accountants, rather than the lawyers dictating what you do. Considering Children’s Needs when Parents Separate.

Both parents need to keep Childrens’ needs in the forefront of their minds:

- Both parents clarify for themselves what they need to tell children about their separation.
- The two parents need to arrange a time to discuss together how they will explain to their children about their separation.
- Both parents to sit down together with children and explain what they are going to do (i.e., separate, and what will happen then...)
- Each parent to speak their “reality” to the children about the separation, as long as it is relevant, content-appropriate and age-appropriate for the children to know. (e.g., “We’ve decided to separate, because I’m not happy and I don’t love mummy the way a husband should love a wife”.)
- Each to explain to the children, in language that each child can understand, outlining what will happen in the process – with the separation.
- It is important to ensure that both parents explain that the “separation” is about the “marital” (couple) relationship, and that they are NOT separating from the children.
- Both parents need to explain that THEY have decided to separate, and that the children are not responsible (not to blame) for the separation.
- Ensure that both parents explain that this is an “adult” decision, and not something that the children need to decide on. When children become distressed it is important that parents help their children deal with the distress, rather than change their decision to reduce the (obvious) distress.
- The Therapist will help the parents realise that the children will need to “grieve” the “death of the marriage/family as it used to be” and that this is a process and will take time for each to accept.
- Your Therapist will encourage both parents to expect emotional reactions from the children, and also difficult questions that they will need to respond to (eg: Why can’t you change your mind and come back home?”).
- If children don’t ask questions, nor show any emotion at the time of announcement, the therapist can help the parents realise that this doesn’t mean that it hasn’t meant anything to them, and guide the parents to provide openings for the children to talk about things that they think or feel later on (so that the dialogue is left “open”).
- Each parent to respect the children’s need to have a good relationship with both parents, and therefore not to denigrate the other parent (e.g., avoid saying things like: “Your mum is a s!u# because she’s had an affair!” or “I’m leaving your dad because he’s a dr^n# and he’s impotent!”).

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WHAT DOES SEPARATION MEAN?

In the therapy sessions it is important for the couple get help to **clarify** what they mean by "separation". This term can mean a variety of things. It is important that not only the therapist have a clear understanding of what it means, but also that the two who are separating both understand the same thing when they use the term "**separation**".

USE SEPARATION TO SORT OUT

- Better communication.
- Deal with hurts in relationship
- Agreement to work out what is best for children
- Develop a trusting relationship for future parenting. If going separate ways, property settlement agreement between them (use their love of children as the focus)
- If going separate ways - burying "dead marriage" (do therapy focusing on them ending the hurts, pain and acrimony of the past, so that they can move on and be healthier as individuals and as parents to their children).
- Bury the old ways of relating and develop new healthier ways of open communication and conflict resolution.
- Make sure that what each partner says that separation means is genuine, rather than further ways for each to continue hurting the other (not for one to use separation as a pay-back for being hurt by the other)
- Ensure that with the clarifying of separation, the two people are aware and responsive to the needs of the children; also consider extended family and the need to do their best to facilitate good relationships with extended family on both sides, and the children.

It can mean:

- I feel pressured and we seem to find it hard to sort anything out, so I want time and space to sort out what I want, and time to clarify things, so that we can decide what to do in the long term.
- I've been very unhappy and suffering, so now, by leaving you I'll make you suffer by seeing how hard it is to live without me.
- I want to stop the ongoing pain and conflict, so we can sort things out long term.
- I really don't have the courage to tell you that I really don't want to be with you, so I'll say that I want to "separate" so that way you cannot feel so hurt and then it will be easier for me to leave.
- I don't want to be with you anymore.
- Exploration of other possible meanings, to encourage CLARITY for the couple, and for their children.

Once they both have a clear understanding about what this means, then it is easier to work through what they need to do to separate.

- SEPARATE : the separation is to have a better relationship as "parents" than they had before when they were "married"

Rules of Separation

1. Clarify what separation means (above). Get a realistic understanding for both partners.
2. Depending on what they understand as separation, the "rules" of separation will vary. Clarify rules that the two people agree to:
 - Are they still "married" and living separately? (maintain marriage vows).
 - Are they "free agents" so that they can do as they please, go out with anyone they want, have sex etc. * This issue is often very important, yet very few couples can address this issue on their own, (as their communication with each other is difficult and they avoid contentious issues) - Get the therapist to assist with these discussions.
 - Is there a time frame that they will use for the separation – 3 or 6 or 9 or 12 months etc.
 - Depending on how they set up the separation, what will they do when the time they have agreed to arrives?