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# COPE Program

## Coping with Separation & Divorce A Parenting Seminar

### Parent Handbook

A collaborative program offered by  
University of Vermont Extension

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## History of the *Coping with Separation & Divorce* program in Vermont

Vermont Family Court was established in 1990 to focus exclusively on children and families. Vermont laws encourage parents to work out agreements instead of waging custody battles. By offering parents information, the potentially devastating effects of separation and divorce on children can be reduced.

Since 1992, University of Vermont Extension has presented a four-hour seminar offering parents information and guidance about parenting during separation and divorce. Family Courts in all 14 counties may order attendance at the program for Vermont parents with minor children filing for separation, divorce, dissolution, establishment of parentage, and changes in parental rights and responsibilities when children under 18 are involved. Approximately 200 parents each month complete the program in Vermont.

The program began with a curriculum called *Helping Children Cope with Divorce and Other Transitions*, developed by Families First in Atlanta, Georgia. This University of Vermont Extension handbook accompanies the most recent curriculum produced by the University of Vermont, *Coping with Separation & Divorce: A Parenting Seminar*. The program is designed to help separating parents

understand their children's perspective as well as their own. This handbook includes material that is presented in the seminar, plus information about Vermont resources to help parents and children. It provides some information for parents dissolving abusive relationships and for those who do not intend to share parenting with the other biological parent as well as information for cooperating parents.

The program and this handbook provide parents with information about parenting skills and children's needs. The goal is to help parents plan wisely for the process of restructuring their family. We suggest that parents who are required to participate in this seminar share this handbook with friends or relatives.

We welcome your comments and suggestions. Please send them to *Coping with Separation & Divorce*, UVM Extension, 617 Comstock Road, Suite 5, Berlin, Vermont 05602-9194, or e-mail to: [christi.sherlock@uvm.edu](mailto:christi.sherlock@uvm.edu). Information about seminar schedules, registration, evaluations of the program, and resources for parents on the *Coping with Separation & Divorce* Web page: [www.uvm.edu/extension/cope/](http://www.uvm.edu/extension/cope/)

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## Introduction: Families change, but a parent is forever

The task of all parents—married, never married, united in civil union, separated, or divorced—is not easy. Children can develop into healthy, caring, and contributing adults, as long as they have a deeply caring relationship with at least one adult, parent, or parent substitute. All children benefit from information, stability, peaceful relationships, and financial support, whatever the parenting arrangement and family structure. At the same time, strong and loving relationships with their children can help parents develop their own capacity for a meaningful life.

The business of reorganizing a family is not easy. It usually involves changes related to household tasks, family finances, relationships with friends and relatives, balancing work and family, effective parenting, family values and traditions, and new people in family life. Coping with changes involved in reorganizing your family is sometimes hard work. Parents would like their children to sail right through the changes, to feel no pain, and to develop into happy and competent children and adults. Few sail through without distress, but the good news is **most children adjust successfully**. Although at times parents and children may be very unhappy about what is going on in their family, it is not the amount of distress that determines the outcome; it is the way the stresses are handled that determines successful adjustment.

So how can parents help their children through family transitions? One way is for parents to **shield their children from their own adult conflict**. Children also adjust better when both parents maintain involvement and share family resources with them, and when the family can stay connected with their community relationships, such as keeping children in the same school. Providing adult supervision when parents cannot be available and counseling for children having difficulty adjusting can also help. With support, and hard work, parents and children alike will learn new ways to relate to each other, and perhaps even be more competent because they have handled a challenge well.

Some of what is suggested in this handbook may seem very unrealistic to you at this point. However, knowing what has been possible for others can guide you in establishing the best possible “family with parents who live in separate homes.”

This handbook and the seminar are a brief introduction to some of what you face as parents. Books, videos, workshops, and Web sites are among the other resources available to provide more depth and many more ideas. Some are listed in the resource section at the end of the handbook; others may be found through your library, bookstore, and the Internet. A word of warning: Don’t accept everything you read or hear uncritically. There are many opinions, but no one right way for every family.

### New families, new language

In this handbook, we often refer to your “child” although we know in many cases more than one child is involved. Other times, we use the word “children” even though you may have only one child. We use the words “parent” and “parents”

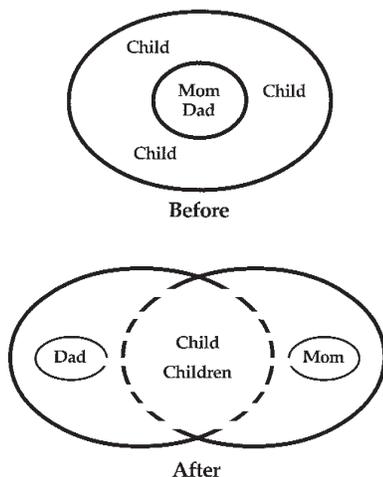
rather than “Mom or Dad,” and we often use references about “parents parting” or “separation” (rather than “divorce”) to include parents in civil unions who are parting, and unmarried parents, as well as married parents who are parting.

# Part 1.

## Understanding separation, dissolution, and divorce from your child's point of view

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Your child's family does not end



### Managing emotions

### Grieving loss

A lot of what we can do for children becomes clear when we think about how they see their family. For most children, separation doesn't change who is in their family. It just changes its spatial arrangement. Instead of having a "nuclear family" (two parents, kids, and pets in one place), they now sometimes have a "binuclear family" (two parents, kids, and pets in *two* places).

While the households are separate, they still contain the child's whole family. Even when new people are added—parents' partners, new children, and the like—all of these people are part of the child's family. Children have the right to maintain and develop relationships with their current extended families, as well as develop new family relationships.

It is not in the best interest of children to try to prohibit their exposure to people who will consistently be a part of their lives and families unless safety is a factor. When children have been exposed to violence, it is entirely appropriate and in their best interest to protect them from further violence to the extent the law will allow. While it is still true that seeing an abusive parent might be important to a child, it is the responsibility of the non-violent parent to balance respecting their children's desire to spend time with the abusive parent with keeping them as safe as possible.

How parents react emotionally when their adult relationship ends depends on many factors: the history of conflict or violence in the relationship, the surprise of the decision to part, whether the decision was mutual, feelings of guilt about leaving or anger over having been left, for example.

Some parents may experience positive feelings such as relief, increased self-confidence, increased independence, and improved relationships with their children. Other parents may experience severe losses: dreams, companionship, love, expectations, future security, and social identity. Those parents who leave and those who feel left will need to mourn what their relationship has meant to them. Our society has not yet developed social rituals to comfort those who grieve the end of relationships as we comfort those who mourn

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## Denial

death. Parents grieving their relationships will need to reach out for the support and information they need to mourn and to restructure their lives.

*Children have no control* and varying amounts of influence on parents' decisions and actions. We can expect them, at first, to see these changes in parents living together as *losses*. Loss causes pain and arouses intense emotions such as sadness, anger, and fear, as well as variations of these. Some grieving time is usually required before children and adults are able to see some of the positive things that go with experiences of "loss."

When families change structure (for example, the children live with only one parent at a time instead of two), grieving the loss of time with parents together may last for at least a year until each family member has lived through all the holidays, special-day celebrations such as birthdays and anniversaries, and vacation periods that will be different from now on.

Remember that children are individuals. The separation of parents can affect each child in the family differently. Each child deserves to be treated individually, according to age, temperament, and the nature of his or her relationship with each parent.

In the process of emotionally accepting all the family changes brought about when parents decide to live apart, it may help to remember that it is normal for parents and children to be sad, angry, and fearful. It is also normal to deny reality to avoid experiencing these strong emotions. While these intense emotions may be uncomfortable, they stimulate energy that can be used constructively to heal the grief caused by change and to aid problem solving.

Denial is an initial automatic reaction that can protect children and adults from overwhelming devastating emotional responses. Children often show denial about family changes by making up explanations that make them feel better such as, "My father has a job on the West Coast now and when he gets the bridge built he'll come back to live with us." Or they may deny that anything is changed or wrong, by saying, "I'm fine, everything is OK. I don't want to talk about it." Adults can engage in the same kind of denial, saying, "Everything is going to be fine. We can manage perfectly well on our own"—without analyzing the financial situation or thinking through a new schedule for child-rearing tasks.

While protective at first, denial can keep adults and chil-

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## Sorrow

dren from problem solving and accepting their lives as they are. It is important for parents to gently talk with their children about the changes that will affect them, to help them deal with the reality of their new circumstances. Children who are adjusting begin to focus on their own developmental tasks rather than the changes in the family.

Adults also need to talk out their own fears with a trusted adult who can help sort out what are the real issues and what are only fears. Talking over the situation with a supportive adult who can respond with positive suggestions may allow a parent the security to accept the reality of the situation and grieve the losses while beginning to see the positive aspects of the changes. Acceptance is the goal in grieving any loss. It comes when one can feel loving, angry, happy, sad, frustrated, calm—all the emotions can flow without being stuck in any one of them.

Children and parents feel sad when they see the family changes as losses. Things children might lose, or fear they will lose, when parents part include the following: knowing they are loved; assumption that physical needs will be met; unscheduled time with parents and siblings; their concept of who they are in their family; and their concept of who are their family, community, friends, and relatives.

Adults lose their dream of their ideal lifestyle, a sexual partner, perhaps the friendship and companionship of the other parent, relatives of the other parent, monetary support, familiar housing, and status in their community. People who were abused also may have lost faith and trust in people in general, as well as having sustained financial losses due to the abuser's destruction of property, or from paying for medical treatment for injuries.

Sadness about all these losses may come and go, and may be triggered by events and experiences. Normally it takes a full year of experiencing all the holidays and special events to ease a family's grief when a death occurs. Grieving a death in our culture may be easier than grieving relationship loss when parents decide to live apart. There are fewer social supports to help manage grief in restructuring your family—rituals (e.g., wakes, memorial services), outpouring of emotional support (cards, flowers, food given) and offers of physical help and presence. Emotional closure is also difficult. People tend to remember the best about someone who dies, but may be less forgiving when their relationship dies.

It is important for children and adults to express in some

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## *Depression*

way (through art, music, poetry, talking) their feelings of sadness. Comfort might also be found when others listen and show interest and caring for their experiences. Familiar places and people, pictures of happy times, and stories of happy times in the past and possibilities for good things in the future will also give comfort for grieving children and parents.

Sometimes parents and or children get stuck at a particular stage in their grieving process. They may suffer from depression and need medical help and counseling. Depression is a normal and common reaction suffered by people who have been abused. Depression is an emotional state that can prevent parents or children from doing usual activities—problems at work or at school may seem insurmountable. Symptoms are atypical behaviors—sleeping too much or inability to sleep, eating too much or inability to eat at all, and difficulty concentrating on present tasks. Watch for extremes in normal behavior, lethargy and hopelessness. Parents or children experiencing signs of depression should see a counselor and/or physician to examine concerns. There are many strategies (medical and behavioral) to help bounce back from depression.

## *Anger*

It is normal for children to feel angry when their lives significantly change—especially when they feel they have had no control over the change. If you are on the receiving end of a lot of anger from your children, it may be hard to take, but it can be a sign that your children feel secure with you. Some children won't risk showing anger to a parent they are afraid will disappear from their lives if they're not always pleasant. Parents can help their children express anger in ways that are not harmful to themselves, not harmful to others, and not harmful to property or the physical environment. Parents are most effective at helping their children do something when they, as parents, can model the behavior they want their children to have.

Normally, parents may feel angry when their adult relationship ends. They may feel angry with the other parent, the situation in general, "the system," or other people who interfered in their relationship. Although it is normal for parents to feel angry, for their own health and their children's well-being, they must manage their anger. It is rare to find kids doing well, and adjusting well while living in a home where a parent is angry all the time.

It is also normal to feel anger as the result of having been

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## Fear

abused by your former partner. People who have been abused, and many people who were exposed to other traumatic events—such as becoming a victim of crime—go through a period of anger. While this is natural, talking with a trusted adult about it may help. Advocates at local domestic violence programs can help survivors of abuse become involved in support groups at the program, and can recommend qualified mental health counsel.

For those who have been emotionally or physically violent toward their partners (for example, name calling; using insults or threats; throwing/breaking things; using intimidating looks or gestures; humiliating, blaming, or isolating your partner; using physical or sexual violence; etc.), you should be aware that your children are being affected by your behavior *even if they don't witness your abuse*. Remember that anger, alcohol/drugs, stress, and the other parent's actions are *not* causing your abusive behavior; your abusive behavior is always *your* choice, and it's a choice which has extremely negative consequences for your partner and children.

All of us are afraid when we don't know what is happening. For children this may occur when parents decide things and change their family life without telling them what's going on. Children who have witnessed the abuse of a parent or who were themselves abused will also be afraid for their own safety and the safety of their abused parent. It is important to allow all children the opportunity to talk about their fears. It is equally important to listen to their fears, respect the authenticity of their fears, and allow them as much control in planning for their emotional and physical safety as possible.

Consistent routines, planning schedules, and conditions that promote the safety of child and parent, help relieve children's fears. Clearly explaining what will happen next is important, but adults don't always know what is going to happen next either. Working out agreements and schedules as quickly as possible for day-to-day living can ease adult anxiety and fears as well as children's. Children need to be told what is happening and how it will affect them.

How, when, and what you tell your child about your separation and divorce depend on the child's age, what

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## Talking with your child about divorce, dissolution, or a resident parent moving out

he or she can understand, and the family lifestyle the child has experienced until now. Many parents think their children are too young to understand, so they tell them nothing. Parents of older children may think the children already know what is happening from their own observations, and avoid giving them additional information. For all children old enough to have developed language, you need to put into words what is happening, what is going to happen, and how both parents will continue—if it is true—to care for, support, protect, and love them.

If you have an infant, explanations will be needed later, when your child begins to understand and communicate in words. For parents of infants, now is not too early to start constructing an explanation that will be helpful to your child about the choices each parent has made regardless of the amount of time and involvement each has in the child's life.

When you first explain your decision to restructure your family, it is ideal if both parents are present and can tell all the children at one time. Parents who tell their children together show they can cooperate despite the change in their adult relationship. This provides a model for the children to continue to love and respect each parent and helps them avoid taking sides against one parent. If all the children are together, they can support and comfort each other from the beginning of the process.

When children get the same message at the same time from both parents, they are more likely to believe that the parents know what they are doing. Most children want to get their parents back together. They may try to get their parents back together by being very good and making promises or by acting out in ways that bring the parents together to solve the child's problems. Some children refuse to believe the break-up is happening to their family. The "certainty" of the situation that parents give children when they tell them together helps each child start accepting what is not going to change. It is helpful to the children if you invite them to ask you questions when they need to.

While it may be ideal if both parents are able to tell the children together and model their cooperation as parents, this is not always possible. If you are concerned that a conversation involving both parents would result in anger, the passing on of too much or incorrect information, or an obvious breakdown of cooperation between parents, it may be better for the children if you talk with them separately.

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## Information for pre-language and non-verbal children

You will have many occasions to talk with your child about what is happening and will happen in your family structure. If you are not satisfied with the way you first told your child about your adult relationship ending, think about what he or she needs to hear that will provide reassurance and hope for happiness. Plan to talk with your child again; don't wait for questions.

You may choose to use books, games, and television shows to start conversations about children and adults who are in the same circumstances as you and your children. See the Reading Lists at the end of the Handbook for suggestions. Discuss how the children feel and what the characters do to make life better for each other.

If you are thinking *this discussion has nothing to do with me — my child is an infant now and/or I'm not married; my child won't ever know the other parent* — it may be helpful to start thinking now about what you will tell your child in the future. At some point in your child's life, questions concerning the other parent are likely to arise. There are many ways to approach truth. It may take some creativity to focus on the good aspects of the other parent (for example their persuasive, winning personality) while at the same time acknowledging some negative realities that are obvious. Thinking about the qualities that first attracted you to the other parent may help you describe the other parent's strengths to your child. Reading children's stories and books for older children that help explain truths in positive ways so that we learn and grow stronger from our experiences can help parents who want to give their children hope and self-confidence and the truth. See other suggestions related to a parent's absence in the next section, "Parenting on your own."

## Parenting on your own

Parents reading this handbook are going through the process of separation, marital divorce, establishing parentage, or dissolution of a civil union. Some have never married, some have just begun the legal divorce process, and some may have been divorced for a few years, have re-partnered, and have involved Family Court again in deciding issues of parental rights and responsibilities. Whatever the family structure or process in creating that structure, children can and do survive and thrive when they have at least one adult involved with them in a deeply caring relationship.

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## *Changes in parenting*

As your adult relationships change, it's likely your parenting is going to change as well. Your child will experience in some way the changes in your emotions and behavior. The disruptions in your life and in your routines are disruptions in your child's life, too. And as your child reacts to those disruptions, he or she will behave differently toward you; so the whole transaction is different. It's typical for parents to have less time and energy for being with children, to be more easily upset by what their children do, to change normal routines and schedules, and to provide less structure and guidance. Changes such as these are normal and they happen whenever there's any big change in the life of a family, such as when a family is experiencing an illness, or a death of a member, or moving, or even taking a vacation.

The challenge during separation and restructuring is to keep the disruptions as manageable as possible, and to gather your energy to continue to provide a safe and predictable life for your children. If you can do that, your children are likely to come through the experience with little harm to their development. And, in fact, they can be learning skills that will help them later in life, as they become more flexible and confident of their ability to cope.

Your children are at risk when you forget that you're a parent, or are so exhausted and distressed by the conflict and changes that you can't act like a parent. Those are the times when your children and you need help from other adults. The longer your children experience not having competent parental care, the more likely they are to have problems as they develop.

How can you tell when you're not being an effective parent? Sometimes parents look at themselves and their children and realize things are not good. You may not be having any fun with your children. You may be angry or short-tempered with them, and your discipline doesn't work. They may defy you. They may be angry with you a lot, or sad and depressed. Children may fight with each other or with their friends. You may just wish they'd go away for a while. You may be angry with yourself or the other parent for not being able to do a good job. You may be telling your child how unhappy you are, or talking about things in your life your child really shouldn't have to know about. You may realize that you're so depressed or hassled that your child has taken over running the household, and is taking care of you.

When you know you're having difficulty being the kind of parent you'd like to be, it's time to step back, assess the situation, set some goals, and make some changes. First, you

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## One parent at a time

have to make sure you're taking care of yourself, and getting the support you need—from family, friends, and professionals—not just from your child. You can't be responsible for your child and help your child with his or her problems if you are overwhelmed by your own.

A second step is to make sure you're making parenting your most important role. Children know when you're not making room for them in your life, and they resent it. You may have to skip some of the things you think are important because there just isn't time or energy for them and your child. So re-think how much time you spend on work, or keeping up with chores, or dating, or hobbies you enjoy. You don't have to cut out everything for your child, but you may have to accept that you can't do everything you'd like, or do it as well as you'd like. The one place where it's harmful to cut corners is in your parenting. You may have to be assertive about limiting some activities; but if you tell people you need to spend more time and energy being a good parent, they're likely to respect and support you. If they don't, perhaps they don't have your child's best interests at heart.

When parents live separately, one of the realities is that children can't be with both parents together as often as the children might like. Children often experience this as a loss, even if they really haven't spent much time with both parents together. They react to the loss of the *possibility* of having both parents together. They may be sad about that, they may blame one or both parents, and they may try to get the parents to be together—often in very creative ways. Your child may not understand that it's not comfortable for the two of you to be together. It helps if you both assure your child that you will both be available, and then make sure you are. When you are supposed to be spending time with your child, make that your top priority. Be reliable and trustworthy for your child. If you're *not* going to be available to your child, try to be honest about that and take responsibility for it. Children tend to blame themselves if a parent disappears from their lives. Make sure they know it's not their fault that you don't want to or can't be their parent.

Generally the children who do best when their parents don't live together are those whose parents try to support rather than interfere with one another's relationship with the children. If you criticize and "bad-mouth" the other parent, you're telling your child it's not all right to love that parent. Being asked to take sides is harmful to children and

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## *An absent parent*

they may come to distrust and resent you.

If you think your children's other parent is unreliable or has other problems, give your children the chance to discover those realities for themselves. Children need to be free to experience both parents in ways that are comfortable for them and that allow them to form their own images and draw their own conclusions about their relationships. Your role as a parent is to help your child understand the experience, not to control all the experiences. If you feel as though your child is endangered when they are with the other parent, remember that there are legal options to help ensure the safety of both children and parents.

When the other parent disappears from your child's life, you may breathe a sigh of relief, or you may be angry because the other parent isn't sharing the responsibility of parenting. You may be sad that your child is deprived of that parent, or annoyed if the child *is* sad, if you feel that parent is best out of your lives. You may want to forget the other parent; but for your child, that parent can't be forgotten and must somehow be understood. You can help by being honest with your child, while remembering your child wants to have good experiences with and memories of that parent. It will help if you keep in mind that the other parent still exists, is still a developing human being, and may reappear in your child's life at some point. And keep in mind that your child may *want* that parent to re-appear, and as a teenager may *seek out* that parent and has the right to do so. So it helps if you've been honest and charitable toward that parent; otherwise, you may lose your child's respect.

## *Parenting skills*

A National Extension Education Model identifies parenting skills and activities, suggesting how parents *nurture, guide, understand, motivate, and advocate* for their child. As you look at the lists below, think about the things you did for your child as part of a parenting couple. Now think about what you are still able to do well as you parent on your own. You may think that some of the responsibilities are now easier than they were when there was another parent who may have argued with you about child-rearing behaviors or disappointed you when expectations were not met.

To make you aware of all the tasks that you are now doing well on your own, as you read the following lists, put a star by those items you are now doing well. Put a checkmark by those areas in which you want to improve your skills. Per-



haps the other parent took the lead or was completely responsible for some tasks, such as planning and preparing nutritious meals or balancing the family checkbook. If so, you may need to develop new skills in those tasks to feel competent and comfortable with parenting in your new family structure.

### Nurture

All the things you do to provide your child with basic necessities (food, clothing, shelter), health care (check-ups, immunizations), and appropriate supervision (parental and commercial childcare) are ways you nurture your child. Some nurturing skills may be easier for you than others. What nurturing skills did you depend on the other parent to do? What will you need to learn now to parent alone comfortably?

- Express affection and compassion
- Foster child's self-respect and hope
- Listen and attend to child's feelings and ideas
- Provide for child's nutrition, shelter, clothing, health, and safety needs
- Celebrate life with child
- Help child feel connected to family history and cultural heritage
- Teach kindness



### Guide

Guiding your child may not require your constant physical presence. However, it does require that you talk with your child about family values, seek information together for solving problems, and coach your child in making beneficial choices.

- Model appropriate, desired behavior
- Establish and maintain reasonable limits
- Provide child with opportunities to learn responsibility
- Teach basic values for human decency
- Teach problem-solving skills
- Monitor child's activities
- Arrange for contact with peers and other adults



### Understand

Learning what is generally expected of children's behavior because of the age and stage of development will help you understand and cope with your child's behavior.

- Observe and understand child development
- Recognize how children influence and respond to what happens to them



## Motivate

Listening to your child's stories or displaying your child's pictures or schoolwork on the refrigerator door motivates your child to learn more. Acknowledgment of good work and encouragement when a task is difficult can motivate children to do their best work.

- Teach child about him/herself, others, and the world
- Stimulate curiosity, imagination, and the search for knowledge
- Create beneficial learning conditions
- Help child process and manage information



## Advocate

Parenting alone can be easier, more fun, less stressed, and more successful when you reach out to your extended family and the community to share your children and get help in fulfilling these important responsibilities of your role as parent.

- Find, use, and create community resources when needed to benefit child
- Talk with family, friends, teachers, and community leaders about social changes that would create supportive environments for children and families
- Build relationships with family, neighborhood, and community groups



## Care for self

Until now, you may not have thought about how caring for yourself helps you care for your child. In the crises of separation and divorce, learning to manage your own emotions and reduce the stresses in your life prepares you to nurture, guide, understand, motivate, and advocate for your child. Caring for yourself will help you "be there" emotionally and spiritually as well as physically for your children to help them adjust to the changes in their family structure.

- Manage personal stress
- Manage family resources
- Offer support to other parents
- Recognize one's own strengths
- Ask for and accept support from others
- Cooperate with your child's other parent
- Have a sense of purpose in setting child-rearing goals
- Seek help to stop drug and/or alcohol abuse

## What children need to hear

*It is helpful to plan what you will say to your children when you first explain about your divorce. The following suggestions and guidelines might help.*

- Give a simple explanation for why you have decided to live apart. For example: “We can’t agree about things that are very important to each of us. We will be happier living apart.”
- Emphasize that only the adult relationship has ended. The special connection between a parent and child is forever. (This is true even when one parent is not able to fulfill the parenting role at any particular time.)
- Explain that you will continue to be parents and provide physical and emotional care for them. (If the other parent is not fulfilling the parent role, talk about what you can do for your child without criticizing, making excuses, or promising that things will change.)
- Offer reassurance that your child’s family will continue, including relationships with siblings, grandparents, and other relatives.
- Reassure your child that he/she did not cause the divorce. Nothing the child did changed the feelings between the parents and nothing he/she does now will change your decision.
- Explain that the decision to separate or divorce was not easy. After working to make the relationship work, you decided you could no longer live together.
- Say that you are sorry for the hurt this decision is causing your child.
- Talk about whatever you will be able to keep the same or similar in your child’s life (school, residence, neighborhood, friends, relatives, place of worship) when explaining the things that will have to change, such as time spent with parents.
- Talk about the daily routines, weekly events, and family rituals that will continue. Show by color-coding a calendar the scheduled contact time with each parent.
- Encourage your child to talk with friends, relatives, school counselors, and other trusted people in your community to find comfort and support. It isn’t necessary to keep the family changes a secret; children need to be free to get support outside their families.
- Most children are aware of extreme circumstances (domestic violence, child abuse, drug and alcohol use, etc.) that may have led to their parents’ separation. If and when it is safe, allow children time to explore their questions and feelings about these circumstances. Not acknowledging what is already known adds to the unhealthy “secrecy” that surrounds these particular issues.
- If your children have witnessed fighting, tell them that now they will no longer have to see upsetting fighting or arguments.

## Part 2.

# Communicating with your child and with your child's other parent

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### Communication with child

When parents communicate effectively with their children, it helps children cope with all the changes family restructuring involves. Children can:

- Understand they are not the cause of the adult's relationship failure.
- Begin to see the positive side of change as well as losses.
- Accept the permanence of the family change.
- Find acceptable ways to express and let go of anger.
- Turn thoughts to succeeding at school and with friends.
- Develop hope for future relationships by learning from others' experiences.

### Communication with child's other parent

When parents communicate effectively with each other they are able to:

- Protect their children from their adult conflict by dealing directly with each other when the child is not present.
- Make fair financial agreements.
- Make decisions in the best interest of their children.
- Create a cooperative parenting plan.

## Helping children cope according to their age and stage of development

Children's reactions to all experiences in their lives depend on the skills they have developed, their histories, their individual temperaments, and their current situations. A child's reactions to parents restructuring their family may be similar to the reactions of other children the same age, but they will also be unique, because each child is unique. We can describe some general expectations and offer some suggestions for children of different ages, but you will have to determine if they fit or are appropriate for your particular child. Observe your child carefully, listen to what other people say

## *Infants (birth to 18 months)*



about your child, and listen to what your child says, and you will have good clues about how your child is experiencing the changes in your family.

Many reactions are predictable if you know a child's age and stage of development. You can use your understanding of your child's needs and likely reactions to prevent some of her distress, and to help her cope with her concerns. When you do this well, your child will keep developing in healthy ways, your relationship will be strengthened, and both of you will learn skills that will be helpful in the future.

You may not be able to follow some of these suggestions if you're not going to be spending regular time with your child. If the other parent isn't supportive of you as you try to maintain your relationship with your child, it's going to be harder to help your child. If you're not in a position where you can help directly, it may still be useful to understand what your child is experiencing and what the other parent may be dealing with. You may be able to work toward a more supportive co-parenting relationship, and you may be able to help your child cope with your situation later.

### *What they understand about their family*

- Understand nothing about adult relationships, but sense parents' emotions.

### *Characteristics*

- Time of rapid physical, mental, and emotional growth.
- Development stimulated when parents make eye contact to talk, sing, smile, cuddle, play games.
- Learning to trust their world and significant people.
- Sense love through parents' responses to their needs.

### *Reactions*

- Changes in eating or sleeping patterns.
- May have bowel disturbances (diarrhea or constipation) or may spit up more often.
- May seem more fretful, fearful, and anxious.

### *Signs of stress*

- More fretful, fearful, and anxious; cry more.
- Eating, sleeping, and elimination patterns change.
- Low weight gain, less growth than normal.
- Unresponsive or withdrawn.

## Toddlers (18 months to 3 years)



### *What you can do to help*

- Talk and sing to the baby in calm, gentle tones.
- Be consistent with feeding, nap time, and other routines.
- Make any necessary changes in caregivers and routines as gradually as possible.
- Rest or relax when the baby is sleeping.
- Call on family or friends for help.
- Remember that infants need frequent contact to maintain relationships.
- Remain calm in front of the baby.
- Protect infants from parents' fighting or emotional outbursts.

### *What they understand about their family*

- Understand that one parent no longer lives in the home, but not why.

### *Characteristics*

- Learning language, but can't describe activities or feelings well.
- Remember and recognize familiar people, places, and activities.
- Have a shaky grasp of reality, and think magically.
- Need routines and regular repetition of familiar and comforting activities and games.
- Are widening their interest in peers and new adults.

### *Reactions*

- Increased crying, clinging behavior.
- Sleep problems.
- Changes in toilet habits.
- Return to earlier, more infantile behaviors, such as demanding to be fed by parents instead of feeding themselves.
- Often feel angry or frustrated about the situation, but cannot understand or explain their feelings.
- May express anger by more frequent temper tantrums, acting sulky, hitting, being irritable and reckless, or withdrawing.
- May start to worry about any kind of separation and may become fearful any time the parent is out of sight, even briefly.

### *Signs of stress*

- Clinging, whining, crying.
- Temper tantrums, biting, hitting, resistance.
- Regression in toileting, feeding, dressing, and other independent behaviors.

## Preschool children (3 to 5 years)



### *What you can do to help*

- Continue to provide nurturing and reassurance, cuddling, and affection.
- Continue established routines.
- Prepare in advance for changes, and give the child signals to get ready for a change.
- Allow some return to more infantile behavior, but set clear limits for acceptable behavior and clear consequences for violations.
- Keep stress of everyday life to a minimum by allowing extra time to accomplish tasks and try not to hurry the child.
- Try to spend some special time alone with each child in the family.
- Give the child some time with other adults (a grandparent, aunt or uncle, or family friend) who are the same sex as the parent who is not available.

### *What they understand about their family*

- Still don't understand what separation or divorce means, but do understand that parents are angry or upset and aren't together anymore, although don't understand why.

### *Characteristics*

- Developing a sense of self.
- Egocentric; believe the actions of others are controlled by them.
- Do not understand time concepts.
- Need consistent caregivers, environment, and routines.
- Learning about being a boy or a girl, and how to behave appropriately.
- Need affection and attentive care—holding, rocking, and hugs.
- Language is getting more elaborate.
- Work out understanding of situations by dramatic play, telling stories.

### *Reactions*

- Feel a sense of loss and sorrow, and may fear the absent parent is gone forever.
- Are likely to have fantasies, both pleasant ("Daddy will come back") and frightening ("Monsters chased me").
- Wonder what will happen to them and fear being abandoned by parents.
- May feel responsible, often blaming themselves for the parents parting.

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## *Preschool (continued)*

- May think that if they had behaved better, their parents would have stayed together.
- Feel insecure about who will take care of them.
- Often become very angry, which they may show either by attacking whichever parent they blame or by turning their anger inward, toward themselves, and becoming depressed or withdrawn.

### *Signs of stress*

- Clinging to adults or security objects.
- Numerous fears, irritability, anxiety, increased crying.
- Regression in sleeping, eating, eliminating, and dressing behaviors.
- Show anger through temper tantrums; sulky, irritable, and reckless behaviors; or withdrawal.
- Fear abandonment; continuously ask for absent parent.

### *What you can do to help*

- Show affection by holding, comforting, being available, listening.
- Give verbal reassurance—both parents saying “I love you.”
- Maintain consistency of caregivers and routines.
- Rehearse or role-play new activities or events.
- Make and stick to a parent-child contact schedule that children can count on.
- Keep promises and schedules.
- Prepare child for transition from one parent to the other.
- Make sure child has special blanket or toys when with each parent.
- Write facts about child in a notebook to pass among all caregivers to maintain consistency.
- Give the child some time with other adults (a grandparent, aunt or uncle, or family friend) who are the same sex as the parent who is not available.
- Protect preschoolers from parents’ fighting and emotional outbursts.
- Encourage children to share any questions or concerns about the divorce or separation.
- Encourage children to express their feelings, including their anger, whether through talking, or some form of art, or some physical activity.
- Set aside some time each day just to talk and reassure children their parents’ care about them.
- Tell children, perhaps repeatedly, that they are not responsible for the divorce.

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## Elementary school-age children (5 to 9 years)



- Let caregivers know what's going on at home.
- Assure the child that he or she will be protected and safe.
- Use picture and story books about families to help child talk about feelings.

### *What they understand about their family*

- Understand what separation means and can think about what might happen to them.
- Believe that their parents no longer love each other, and know they will live apart.

### *Characteristics*

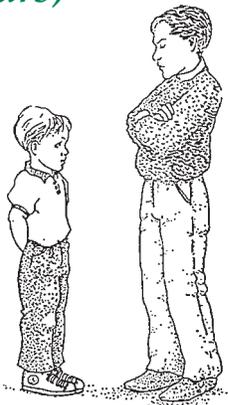
- Developing skills that result in feelings of competence.
- Like to act out the roles of adults and enjoy fantasy play.
- Identify with super-heroes from books and television.
- Identify with same-sex parent; loyal to both parents.

### *Reactions*

- Feel guilty and responsible for causing one parent to leave.
- Feel sad about loss of family.
- Fear abandonment and loss of order in life.
- Long for absent parent, regardless of how that parent treated them.
- Concerned about parents' welfare.
- Doubt they are loveable—*Did a parent leave because I'm no good?*
- Sometimes feel rejected by an absent parent.
- Fear replacement by other children in their parents' lives.
- Strong wish to reunite parents.
- Feel deceived.
- Feel acute sense of loss for a parent who is not regularly present.
- Usually hope strongly that their parents will get back together.
- May become very depressed, showing changes in eating and sleeping habits, overall lack of interest in life, poor concentration, crying, irritability and withdrawal, and a general sense of hopelessness.
- May fear abandonment, and worry about the future and their parents' wellbeing.
- May have trouble going to sleep and may show symptoms of physical illness.
- May become extremely angry with both parents over the divorce.
- May direct anger outward into misbehavior, or inward into shame or develop physical symptoms.

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### *Middle school-age children (9 to 12 years)*



#### *Signs of stress*

- Pervasive sadness, grief, withdrawal.
- Anger and increased aggressiveness.
- Trouble going to sleep, more physical illnesses.
- Fear going to school, not being picked up on time.
- Difficulty playing and having fun.

#### *What you can do to help*

- Maintain a consistent routine.
- Offer physical and verbal reassurance.
- Rehearse or role-play new activities or events.
- Assure your child that he or she will continue to see both parents, if that is true.
- Make a plan for parent-child contact the child can depend on.
- Give child permission to love and talk about and be with the other parent, if that's possible.
- Inform teachers and school counselors about family changes; get help with school problems.
- Encourage children to talk about the divorce—with parents, with relatives, or with trusted friends.
- Read a book that includes situations like yours.
- Look for signs of depression, fears, and troubled behavior and be willing to get professional help.
- Talk to other adults—not your elementary school children—about adult problems such as money troubles, unresolved feeling toward the other parent, work stresses, etc.
- Inquire at your school or community center about a support group for children in family transitions that your child might join.

#### *What they understand about their family*

- Understand separation and divorce in a realistic way, but usually do not accept easily the changes in family restructuring.

#### *Characteristics*

- Focus on rules, right and wrong, black or white.
- Peer group and activities are very important.
- Developing a sense of self that includes characteristics of both parents.
- Going through puberty, very self-conscious, often trying to separate from parents.

#### *Reactions*

- Often become very angry.
- May feel disillusioned, betrayed, or rejected by one or both

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## *Middle school-age (continued)*

parents, and may lose trust in their parents or in relationships in general.

- Tend to blame one parent and side with the other.
- May feel shame and powerlessness about parents' breakup.
- May lose self-esteem, and may worry about being loved and loveable.
- Tend to be highly moralistic and critical, and may harshly judge parents' decision to part.
- May be extremely embarrassed or disturbed by any change in parental sexual behavior.
- May take greater risks and be more rebellious than is normal at this stage.
- May become depressed or withdrawn, or may threaten suicide.
- May behave much better—not worse—feeling that if their own behavior improves, they can save the marriage.
- Process of developing a sense of independence may be disrupted, as children may feel afraid to separate from the parents or feel a strong need to align with one or the other parent.

### *Signs of stress*

- Anger directed outward into misbehavior.
- Physical symptoms, headaches, stomachaches.
- Depression, crying, irritability, and withdrawal; a general sense of hopelessness.
- Changes in eating and sleeping habits.
- Overall lack of interest in life, poor concentration.
- Academic difficulties because of inability to concentrate.
- Peer problems from acting out anger or withdrawing.
- Cruelty to animals or smaller children.
- Taking things that belong to others.

### *What you can do to help*

- Encourage child's questions and talk about concerns.
- Listen; accept feelings and complaints without judging.
- Help child find words to describe the experience.
- Get professional help for depression and troubled behavior when needed.
- Maintain consistent routine and family rituals that increase feeling secure.
- Ask teachers about signs of stress they may observe in your child.
- Encourage your child to see the good in the other parent.
- Support the child's contact with the other parent through phone calls, e-mail, etc.
- Avoid comments or behavior that would lead your child to

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## Adolescents (12 to 18 years)



choose sides.

- Protect your child from adult conflict and from adult dating or new relationships.
- Give children opportunities to discuss and understand their feelings.
- Coach them in problem solving and constructive ways to handle feelings.
- When children have difficulty talking with their own parents, encourage them to confide in another trusted adult (relative, family friend, teacher, or other professional).
- Keep to established routines as much as possible.
- Continue to monitor children's activities: where they are, who they're with, and what they're doing. Emphasize that although the family may be changing, children must continue to show respect for both parents, to follow house rules, to do their best in school, and so on.
- Resist the urge to use children as "replacements" for the missing partner: parents must develop adult sources of support and an adult social life, not depend on their adolescents to fill empty places left by the divorce or separation.

### *What they understand about their family*

- Understand family changes and their implications. Usually want to know reasons and may try to argue with parents about the decision.

### *Characteristics*

- Developing a separate identity from parents, may reject family activities.
- Need peer approval and are concerned about image.
- Struggle with conflict between wanting to be close to family and being independent.
- Need support and limits, and guidance to become adults.
- Become cynical when parents act like adolescents—for example, dating.
- Understand divorce issues, but usually do not accept them.
- Involved in own romantic relationships.
- Preparing for a future outside the family.

### *Reactions*

- Grief, anger, resentment over loss of family and childhood.
- Concerned their own future relationships may be doomed.
- May idealize absent parent.
- May be embarrassed or disturbed by parents' dating or sexual behavior.

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- Resent having to assume more responsibility at home.
  - May take greater risks and be more rebellious (shoplifting, using drugs, skipping school, becoming sexually active).
  - May abandon plans for the future, fearing loss of financial support that was expected.
  - Anxiety may cause them to rush into intimacy, or avoid it altogether.
  - Internalize emotional distress (depression, suicidal thoughts, loss of self-esteem).
  - Experience problems in school because of difficulty concentrating.
  - Fatigue, physical complaints.
  - Developing autonomy may be disrupted because of need to support a parent.

### *Signs of stress*

- Depression, feelings of hopelessness.
- Anger, fighting, defiance of authority, delinquency.
- Substance abuse.
- Leaving home.
- Other risky behaviors.

### *What you can do to help*

- Give teenagers opportunities to discuss and understand their feelings.
- Maintain expectations and reassure them about the future.
- Maintain some family traditions and rituals, and involve them in designing new ones.
- Involve teens in planning parent-child contact time (but don't expect them to take responsibility for initiating contact).
- Monitor your teenager's activities and companions. It may be tempting to allow teenagers to become more independent faster, but they need more, not less, parental supervision when the family is changing.
- Insist that your teen show respect for both parents, follow rules, and do his or her best in school.
- Do not overburden teens with adult responsibilities.
- Create an adult support system; avoid depending on your child for emotional support.
- Use a team approach; adolescents will play parents against each other to get what they want.
- Protect your teenager from adult conflict.

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## The big picture, or the bottom line

Children of all ages need parents who are tuned in to what they are feeling, who are available when needed, and who can talk with the child about what he is experiencing. Parents can't always make things better for a child, but you can let your child know that you understand and accept what she is feeling, and that you'll do what you can. Just showing your child that you care and that he is worth your time may be enough.

What your child *doesn't need* is for you to put your child in the middle, to expose your child to your conflict with the other parent. You *can* go through family changes without creating *new* problems for your child, if you keep being a parent as your first priority.

## Children's needs change

Children react differently during each stage in their development because they understand their world differently. As children enter each new stage, they may want to talk about and understand their family situation all over again. Parents sometimes find this upsetting, but it is important to talk about it again with your child because the child has to figure out what it means using the new skills and viewpoints developed as part of the new stage. And keep in mind that you don't have to try to figure out how to help your child all by yourself. Counseling, family therapy, and parent support and education groups can be especially helpful in understanding, guiding, and nurturing.

## Parent-with-parent communication

Children do benefit when their parents can communicate with each other. The parents may no longer be partners, but they are still parents to the children.

After a separation and/or divorce, parents have several ways of communicating (or not) with each other.

- Some parents do not communicate at all.
- Some parents are unable to communicate (e.g., when domestic violence or safety concerns prohibit equal and healthy communication).
- Some parents try to communicate and end up in arguments.
- Some parents are able to cooperatively, respectfully, and patiently communicate with each other about their children.
- Some parents can communicate fairly well with each other about their children some of the time while at other times they end up in conflict.

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## Should parents try to communicate with each other?

## Parent-with-parent communication tips

Whether parents should try to communicate with each other depends upon several factors:

- Safety of either parent and/or children.
- History of communication between the parents (problem solving, unresolved arguments, or the use of violence and intimidation to control the other parent).
- Ability of parents to focus the conversation on the children, now that parents live separately.
- Willingness of each parent to end a conversation respectfully if tension escalates.
- Willingness and ability of each parent to use written communication such as journals, e-mail, and letters if telephone or face-to-face communication is difficult or impossible.

### Communicating in writing (if talking to each other is difficult)

These options include e-mail messages, letters, journals, or logs written in any kind of bound book or loose leaves in a binder.

- Keep all written communication brief and about the children only. Stick to the “facts only”—for example, *“Johnny needs his ear medication given to him 3x daily and kept in the fridge. Sally is staying dry through the night. Michelle wants to go to her friend Mary’s birthday party Saturday; her phone # is 555-1121.”*

### Communicating on the phone, if possible

- When you call the other parent, always ask if it is good time to talk about the children, and if not, ask when may be a better time.
- Use a business-like and respectful tone when speaking to your child’s other parent.
- Keep all communication focused on the children.
- If communication is sometimes difficult with the other parent, make sure the telephone calls happen when the children are not present or at least are out of earshot.
- If you feel yourself begin to get upset, you can tell your child’s other parent that you must resume this conversation at another time and hang up.

### Meeting face to face, if possible

- Meet in a neutral public place (like a coffee shop or park). This may help each of you keep feelings in check. Make sure the children are not present.
- Develop an agenda and stick to it. Agree that discussion

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will focus on the children.

- Be clear on the topic of discussion. Think of various options that might meet your children's needs. Try to think in advance about your parent partner's point of view. Sort out what points might be negotiable on the issue. Bring any relevant facts or papers to the meeting.
- Introduce a topic in terms of a goal—for example, *I'd like to talk to you about Sally's summer plans*. Set a tone of problem solving—for example, *This is the issue, how can we solve it?*
- Make statements in terms of your feelings rather than statements that accuse your parent partner of wrongdoing—for example, *I feel that the children need more supervision after school* rather than *You put the children at risk by letting them stay home alone after school*.
- Express your views as clearly and completely as possible. Ask the other parent his or her opinion, and whether more information or time is needed to make a decision. Ask for clarification if you don't understand the other parent's response.
- Identify areas of agreement and areas of disagreement. Be prepared to negotiate.
- Stop talking for a while if you feel an argument beginning. Schedule another meeting if necessary to conclude the discussion.

**Remember the priority should be the safety of yourself and your children. If communicating with the other parent is not safe, then parent-to-parent communication just may not be possible.** In this case, communication can be through a neutral third party or through attorneys. The Court may appoint a professional Parent Coordinator to manage communication between parents.

### **Cooperative parents: The best-case scenario**

- Communicate directly with each other.
- Respect each other's privacy.
- Show respect for and appreciate the positive attributes of the other parent.
- Make equitable financial agreements.
- Provide normal experiences and basic material needs for their children.
- Use transition times to be courteous and respectful of the other parent.
- Focus on and respond to the children's feelings.

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## Domestic violence/ Safety issues

*Parental conflict is not the same as domestic violence. Parental conflict may include angry verbal attacks, but it does not include the ongoing pattern of threats and tactics of control found in situations involving domestic violence.*

Not all couples will be able to have face-to-face communication because of safety, anger, geographic distance, schedules, attitudes, etc. If there has been a history of domestic violence based on one partner using threats, emotional violence including coercive behaviors such as economic control and isolation, and physical and/or sexual violence to control and dominate the other partner, it is likely that any face-to-face meeting will put the victim in danger. Cooperative parenting in these situations is not possible and contact between the parents should be avoided. In some cases, when an abuser gets treatment, his or her behavior changes. If the abuser's behavior does not change, contact between the parents should continue to be avoided and special safety plans for the children will need to be implemented.

Children who witness domestic violence feel afraid for themselves and for their parents. They are afraid when they see or hear a parent being hurt. They are afraid the police will have to come or maybe will not come in time. They may feel they should help a parent who is getting hurt and feel responsible for the injuries they cannot prevent. Abusers often use parenting and child related issues as vehicles for controlling their partners. Children most often hear these arguments, internalize them to mean that they are doing something wrong, and blame themselves as the cause of the abuse. Children who watch one parent control the other often learn to use power and control tactics on others, especially siblings, to solve problems. They will do what they see adults doing. In this way, they learn unhealthy responses to conflict.

Abusers don't take responsibility for their behavior and regularly blame their abusive behavior on the victim. Children who witness domestic violence can be influenced a great deal by the abuser's tactics and often come to blame the victim for the violence, the separation, and the divorce.

Children who have witnessed a parent using emotional, physical, or sexual violence to intimidate and control the other parent may suffer a variety of physical, behavioral, and psychological problems. These problems can include failure to thrive (beginning in infancy), sudden and severe drops in school performance or general functioning, insomnia, speech disorders, antisocial or destructive behavior, personality problems, depression, and post-traumatic stress syndrome. Over 60% of the families of children who had attempted suicide reported that children witnessed physical violence between their parents.

Witnessing domestic violence or being abused can have

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*How can parents  
keep themselves and  
their children safe?*

devastating effects on a child's adulthood. For example, six out of ten male abusers and over three out of ten victims state that they witnessed domestic violence in their families of origin. And physical abuse in childhood increases the odds of future delinquency and adult criminality.

When children have been exposed to violence, it is appropriate and in their best interest to protect them from further violence to the extent that the law will allow. While it is still true that seeing an abusive parent might be important to children, it is the responsibility of the non-violent parent to balance respecting their children's desire to see the abusive parent with keeping them safe.

Keeping children safe from parental violence is very important to families and to our communities. If children have been exposed to violence, it is essential for everyone's future to first end the abuse, ensuring the adult victim and children's safety. Then get appropriate counseling for the children, the abused parent, and the abusive parent.

- A parent can get a Relief from Abuse Order from the court to protect self and/or children from an abusive parent. Violating this order is a crime. It is not necessary to hire an attorney to request this protection. For information and support, call your local domestic violence program: The statewide, toll-free number that will connect you with your local program is 1-800-ABUSE95 (1-800-228-7395).
- A parent who is being or has been abused can seek shelter, information, advocacy, and support from a local domestic violence program. Services are free and confidential.
- While an abusive parent may still be entitled to contact with the children, the court is required to set conditions to protect both the child and the abused parent. Relief from Abuse orders and supervised parent/child contact are necessary for safety in some cases.
- **If you are the parent who has used emotional, physical, or sexual violence against your partner, the best thing you can do for your own future, your children, and your past and future partners is to admit that to yourself and get into a domestic abuse education program. Call Spectrum Domestic Abuse Project at (802) 864-7423 for information about current programs in your location.**

Domestic violence takes many forms. Most people understand that someone has been abused when there are bruises or more serious physical harm, but domestic violence also

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## What behavior is considered abusive?

includes sexual and emotional assaults. In Vermont, it is a crime to attempt to harm a partner (even if you don't succeed), or to deliberately or recklessly hurt a partner, or to deliberately make your partner afraid of serious injury.

Domestic violence is a pattern of assault and coercive behaviors (psychological and/or physical) designed to dominate and control another person so the abuser gets his or her own way. This pattern can begin in the early stages of a relationship, may begin when a woman becomes pregnant, or may begin during a separation process.

In some relationships in which there is domestic violence, physical abuse may occur infrequently because threats of violence and the abuser's ongoing use of coercive tactics of control may intimidate the abused parent into being compliant most of the time. However, it is more common for victims to report that physical violence is a regular occurrence. Abused parents recognizing they are in this situation need information and help. Direct contact with the abuser—especially at the time of separation—may be dangerous or even deadly.

If you or someone you know is abused, please refer them to their local domestic violence program. Victims can call the statewide, toll-free number: 1-800-ABUSE95 (1-800-228-7395) to be connected to their local domestic violence program. Programs provide a variety of confidential services for abuse victims and children, including the following:

- Help obtaining a Relief from Abuse Order.
- A temporary place to stay or a hiding place.
- Peer counseling and support groups.
- Help obtaining medical and legal services and support from social programs (child-care, food stamps, welfare, etc.).
- Emergency food and clothing, etc.

## Situational violence

One or both partners may engage in violent behaviors at the time of separation and the beginning of restructuring the family. This is sometimes called "situational violence" because it occurs in situations where there is no prior history of violence or abuse between partners until intense emotions surface because of the break-up. While both parents may or may not participate equally in this behavior, it is a safety risk for children and parents, is harmful for children to see, and must be prevented by careful planning or avoidance of any contact between parents while emotions are turbulent. At some future time these parents may be able to co-parent agreeably when they have disengaged from each other emotionally and established new boundaries for their interactions. (In terms of intimacy and closeness, the opposite of love is not *hate* but *indifference*.)

## Part 3.

# Restructuring your family

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### The law and your decisions about your family

When parents come to court to legally dissolve their relationship, the parents have to make decisions about issues concerning the children. The court has the responsibility to make sure the decisions are consistent with the law and are in the best interest of the child. The Family Court must deal with questions about decision-making on behalf of the children, living arrangements, and financial support. These kinds of issues are governed by legal standards and are part of Vermont statutes. This can involve complex legal issues that have long-term effects on families, and it is often a good idea to seek legal advice.

The law encourages parents to agree on the plan for parenting the children after separation. Agreements that parents make regarding the parenting of their children are assumed to be in the best interest of their children. In order to ensure that parents consider all aspects of parenting, such agreements are required to address the following areas:

- **Physical living arrangements.** Where the children stay and when they stay there.
- **Parent-child contact.** This usually refers to the schedule for both parents to spend time with the children. Sometimes parents work out a schedule for how holidays and school vacations are to be spent with the children. If parents have difficulties communicating, the more detailed the schedule the less likely it is that disputes will happen.
- **Medical, dental, and health insurance and care.** Who will provide the coverage and what the specific coverage will be and who will take the children for the care.
- **Travel arrangements.** Who will provide transportation for parent-child contact and who will pay for it. Under what circumstances the children can travel out of state or out of the country.
- **How the parents will communicate with each other** about the child's welfare. Specifically, how parents will provide each other with information about the children, their schedule, school progress, extra-curricular activities, child-care, etc.

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## Parental rights and responsibilities (formerly referred to as custody)

*The wording of the law has changed from “custody” to “parental rights and responsibilities” to emphasize the law’s policy of protecting children.*

- **If parents have chosen to share or divide parental rights and responsibilities**, what the procedures are going to be if they disagree over some part of parenting their children. Parents need to state specifically how they will resolve any disputes that arise regarding the children. Some solutions might be to agree to seek mediation or to work with a particular therapist or counselor in deciding what is best for the child.

The Court may refuse to approve any agreement that is found not to be in the best interests of the children. The law is based upon the principle that the best interests of the child should determine the outcome of these issues, and therefore, when parents cannot agree and the judge is making the decision, he or she is bound by the requirements of the statutes.

The relationship between children and their parents in a divorce, once called “custody,” is now called *parental rights and responsibilities*. The word “custody” is sometimes used when describing people who have broken the law and are arrested, put into confinement, or placed in detention. Children in a divorce don’t need to think that any of these things are happening to them because their parents are ending their legal relationship.

Children need to know that their parents each have the responsibility to take care of them financially and emotionally, to guide and parent them and to spend time with them no matter how angry the parents are with one another.

There are two major parts to parental rights and responsibilities—legal responsibility and physical responsibility.

- **Legal responsibility** defines the right and responsibility of a parent to determine and control matters affecting a child’s welfare and upbringing, other than routine daily care and control of the child. Examples include decisions regarding education, non-emergency medical and dental care, religion, and travel. Essentially it is the right to make major life decisions for the child. **Legal responsibility may be held solely by one parent, or may be shared between both parents, or divided when at least one child is living with each parent.**
- **Physical responsibility** defines the right and responsibility to provide routine daily care and supervision of the child while taking into consideration the right and responsibility of the other parent to have contact with the child.

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## Cooperative parenting

Essentially, it is the right and responsibility to make daily decisions for a child. **Physical responsibility, like legal responsibility, may be held solely by one parent, or may be divided or shared.**

Parents don't have to like each other to make cooperative parenting agreements. While keeping other aspects of their lives separate and private they can work together to come to an agreement that ensures the health, happiness, and well-being of their children.

Parents may share the legal decisions affecting their children and share physical rights and responsibilities, if they both agree and can plan how they will resolve their differences in the future. **Vermont law does not permit shared parental rights and responsibilities—either legal or physical—unless both parents choose this arrangement.**

Making decisions together as parents is successful when parents are committed to actively raising their children together. Parents must be willing to put their children's needs ahead of their own. They need to be able to see each other's point of view, respect and encourage the children's bond with the other parent, and separate their anger and disappointments with each other from their parent roles. Shared parenting requires parents to communicate and cooperate to carry out a specific plan and to be flexible about changing the plan when necessary.

## Shared parenting

Shared parenting is not possible or even safe in every situation. It is a risk when there is a history of family violence and/or emotional, physical, or sexual abuse. Substance abuse that interferes with responsible decision-making would indicate that a shared parenting agreement might not be in the children's best interest. Parents who cannot separate their own needs from those of their children and who continue intense, bitter hostility and conflict toward each other are not likely to succeed with a joint parenting arrangement. Work schedules and geographic distances may make sharing parenting decisions unworkable. It is easy to focus on what is convenient for parents and to forget that it is the children whose lives are complicated by having parents in two different homes. Consider how the schedule affects them, and accept that the adults who have made the decisions ought to bear the inconveniences as much as possible.

The court will decide Parental Rights and Responsibilities if the parents cannot come to an agreement. When the court

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## Parent-child contact

has to decide for the parents, the law says that the court must award parental rights and responsibilities primarily to one parent. If the parents are unable to cooperate in order to reach an agreement, it is unlikely that they would be able to make joint decisions in sharing responsibilities.

*Parent-child contact* is the term used to describe what has been known in the past as *visitation*. Children are dependent on the love and support of both of their parents to grow and develop into healthy adults. The wording of the law was changed to be more sensitive to the fact that children need to be parented, not “visited” by their parents

Children need to be able to spend as much time as possible with each of their parents. When parents separate, their children should not be denied the opportunity to spend quality time with each of their parents. If the parents had remained together, the children would have enjoyed access to each parent on a daily basis. Therefore, unless there are good reasons to limit the contact a parent has with the children, such as one parent’s use of violence against the other and/or the children, the parenting plan should include contact with both parents on a regular basis.

## *Abusive parents and parent-child contact*

Despite the fact that many children still feel a bond with an abusive parent after the parents separate, the children’s and victim’s safety must always be the paramount consideration.

When one parent’s behavior with a child or a parent places the child or parent at risk, limitations need to be placed on the parent-child contact. Such limitations may include supervised visitation or prohibitions on the use of alcohol or restrictions about where the abusive parent may pick up or take the child.

Even when there are concerns about a child’s or parent’s safety, an abusive parent will usually not be denied contact completely. The contact may be supervised by an appropriate person or a supervised visitation center, or structured to protect the child and abused parent. If supervised visitation is requested, the parent who requests it needs to find an appropriate person to supervise because most Vermont family courts do not have access to a supervised visitation center. Denying a parent contact with his or her child is only a solution where all other options for protecting the child and abused parent have failed.

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## *Child support and parent-child contact*

Child support and parent-child contact are two separate issues. A parent who is not paying child support is still allowed contact with his or her children. In the same manner, payment of child support does not determine the amount of parent-child contact. Children need both the financial and emotional support of their parents. It makes no sense to deny children emotional support of one parent because that parent is not being responsible for financially supporting his or her children.

## *Changing residences and parent-child contact*

If one parent decides to relocate, the parenting arrangement may have to be re-evaluated in light of the change to ensure the children still have the opportunity to spend time with both parents. Whether a long-distance move of a parent is reason to change parental rights and responsibilities depends on the circumstances of the case. The move will be evaluated in light of the best interests of the children. The court may order the parent to delay the moving plans until the parenting issues have been resolved.

## *When one parent is not spending enough time with the children*

The court cannot force a parent who is not spending enough time with his or her children to change. A judge ordering a parent to spend time with the children won't work. There are other reasons and problems that prevent parents from continuing their relationship with their children. Education or counseling will help more than a court order.

## **Financial decisions**

As in the case of parenting, the law encourages the parties to come to agreements on the division of their personal property and obligations. However, child support is governed by other considerations and agreements must comply with certain criteria.

## *Child support*

Vermont, like every state, has established child-support guidelines. The underlying principle of the guidelines is to make sure that children receive the same proportion of parental income after separation and divorce as they would receive if their parents were living together. Studies show that parents tend to spend the same proportion of their combined income on their children, regardless of whether the parents are rich or poor. Because of these studies, the Vermont guidelines have been designed to consider the combined income of both parents.

Another purpose of the guidelines is to ensure that par-

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## *Property debt*

ents with the same income levels are required to pay similar amounts of support for their children. A Magistrate decides the amount of child support paid. The Agency of Human Services has prepared a booklet that explains the steps you need to follow.

**Child support amounts can only be changed with a written order from the Magistrate, and then only in cases where there is a change in the circumstances of one of the parties.**

**A child support order issued by the court is effective until the court modifies it. Parents do not have the right to change the order themselves.**

If the paying parent fails to pay child support, the children involved will suffer. Our laws require that court-ordered child support be withheld from wages if any child support due under an order is more than one week late. Child support also may be deducted from tax refunds and other payments, and the state may suspend a person's drivers license, hunting license, or other license certification or registration issued by the state to conduct a trade or business, including a license to practice a profession or occupation.

In Vermont, the court will divide all property at the time of your divorce or dissolution. Virtually all property is considered to be marital property or property of the union. For instance, property that you inherit and property given to you by a family member will be divided. The court can also divide property which either of you owned before the marriage or civil union. It does not matter in whose name the property is held.

Unlike child support and parenting plans, the property division cannot be changed after the divorce or dissolution is final. This means that once your divorce or dissolution is final, the division of property is final. It is important, therefore, that your property division is not tied to your child support or your parenting plan.

You have debts for which you are responsible, such as a bank or family loans, credit cards, medical bills, or utility bills. Your divorce or dissolution does not make either of you free from the financial responsibility incurred while you were together. If a creditor cannot collect the debt from one of you, the creditor can sue the other for the debt. Cars may be repossessed and homes lost through bank foreclosure unless both of you make responsible and timely plans for the way the debt will be paid off.

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## Spousal maintenance

“Spousal maintenance” is the payment of support by one of you to the other. The purpose of maintenance is to prevent financial and social hardship and disruption that the transition may cause a financially dependent person. The court may order maintenance if one of you does not have enough income, property, or both to support your reasonable needs, and is unable to support yourself by working. Reasonable needs are measured by the standard of living you had together.

The court may order “long-term maintenance” or what is called “rehabilitative maintenance,” which is temporary. If, as an example, one of you has been away from the job market for a while, or needs more education or training to become self-sufficient, maintenance may be ordered for the time necessary for the training or education to be completed. If, however, there is a big difference between your incomes, there has been a long marriage during which the dependent person was a homemaker, and will never be able to earn enough to live in the life style established together, long-term maintenance may be more appropriate.

If you do not request any maintenance at the time of the divorce or dissolution, you cannot ask for it after it is final. But once the court orders it, the amount and the length of time it is ordered may be changed later if there are changes of circumstances.

### **Protect children from conflicts over money**

Above all, issues of money are issues for the parents. The following guidelines will help you protect your child from conflicts over money:

- Schedule time to talk about money issues when children cannot hear the conversation.
- Separate parenting issues from financial issues in discussions with the other parent.
- Don't blame the other parent when explaining financial reality to children.
- Constantly reassure children that they will be cared for after the separation and divorce. While it may seem obvious that children will always have a place to live and food to eat, they may have some fears about what will become of them.

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## New relationships

Statistics show that most single parents will date and re-partner within five years of separating from the other parent. Parents must help their children adapt to the new people in their lives. Be cautious about introducing people you are dating into your children's life. Dates should not be included during parent-child contact time until it is certain the person is likely to become a permanent partner. If children become involved with their parents' casual dates, they can be hurt and confused again and again when the parents stop dating someone for whom the children feel attachment.

## Step-families

When a parent re-partners, the children may become part of a family with a step-parent and step-brothers and step-sisters. When both parents remarry, the children may live in two step-families with four parents and siblings who have different parents and who also live in two step-families. Blending families presents challenging adjustments for everyone. Even when the step-parent doesn't have children, that person brings to the new family different perspectives, rules, and goals.

Second marriages are at statistically greater risk for ending in divorce than first marriages. There are many reasons this might happen. Sometimes the rules for each family don't always fit together very well. Parents often have unrealistic expectations that all the children will love each other and the new step-parent just because the adults love each other. They may also expect that each partner will easily love the other's children. Members of blended families can be greatly disappointed, confused, and unhappy when expectations can't be quickly realized and new rules cause major conflicts.

Parents wishing to create a step-family or blended family may avoid problems and conflict by reading about successful step-parent attitudes and skills (see the reading list at the end of this handbook). Educational programs or counseling can help parents prepare for the changes they will face.

## Step-parents

Step-parents can take the role of respected significant friend and mentor instead of disciplinarian for their step-children. The children will adjust more quickly to the new family if the parent with the established relationship handles the discipline. Older children particularly will resent the new parent trying to impose and enforce new rules.

The best goal a step-parent can work toward is mutual respect. Children should not be expected to love a new step-

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## *Extended family and friends*

parent in the same way they love their other parents. Feelings of deep affection and attachment may develop through shared experiences, happy moments, and stress-free interactions. The children will decide if and how much they can love the stepparent without betraying loyalty to their other parents. Creating a strong, happy blended family takes time and effort and does not just happen because a parent has a new partner.

When parents part, their family of origin can be part of the solution or part of the problem. Grandparents and other relatives who have developed close bonds with children can provide stability and continuity in a time of great change. They give emotional support to parents and children, provide emergency or ongoing childcare, and can act as a parent substitute when children lose contact with a parent. Parents need to allow children continued contact with relatives on both sides of the family. They also need to caution family members to be respectful of the children's relationship with the other parent. It may be necessary to educate relatives about the negative effects on children of hearing either parent criticized. Relatives need to encourage the children's relationship and contact with both parents when there are no safety issues, regardless of their own feelings of disappointment or anger with a parent they blame.

Separating and divorcing couples may drift away from mutual family friends because the friends become uncomfortable about taking sides. Newly single parents are likely to make new friends as they develop interests no longer compatible with their couple friends. It may be necessary to plan how children will continue their contact with the children and adult family friends with whom they have enjoyed close relationships. This will prevent further loss for children. It is also important for children as well as parents to make new friends with others who are experiencing family changes.

## *School and community support*

Both parents have the right and responsibility to see their children's school records and to participate in school events and activities, regardless of parenting agreement plans (unless there is a specific court order that terminates all parental rights of a parent). Both parents should make contact with the school to ask for notices of school events and parent conferences. Depending on how the school communicates with parents, it may be helpful for nonresidential parents to pro-

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vide a homeroom teacher with self-addressed envelopes for school notices or it may only be necessary to give the school administration a current address.

Encourage children to participate in support groups at school or in the community to help them cope with family changes. If a group is not available, parents can ask schools, agencies, and community organizations to start groups to give children support. Counseling and support groups can teach children communication skills, help them change mistaken beliefs, and improve their skills for managing feelings. Therapy, counseling, support groups, and educational programs can help both children and adults.

# Part 4.

## Resources for you

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### Getting help

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#### *Programs/services to which the Family Court might refer parents who are parting*

Several programs are now available statewide for use in cases where the parties cannot or will not agree or want to use an alternative way of coming to an agreement. There are subsidies available for all of these programs. In most cases, the court will determine costs and the parties' financial responsibilities.

#### **Mediation**

Mediation is a process in which separated parents work with a trained and experienced dispute-resolution professional to explore their interests, evaluate possible solutions, and create agreements. Mediation can occur before, during, and after a separation and/or divorce. The mediators are neutral and do not represent any one point of view. They do not decide who is right or wrong, but help parties communicate in an informal and confidential setting. The mediation sessions focus on helping parents reach agreements about the children, parent-with-parent communication, parent-child contact schedules, division of property and debt, support of partner and/or children, tax issues, etc.

When final agreements are made, the mediator drafts a memo reflecting the parents' agreements. This document can be given to attorneys and/or submitted directly to the Family Court for approval and to be ordered by a judge.

Agreements made in mediation are usually more workable—thus less likely to return to Family Court—than arrangements ordered by a judge. Mediation is often much less expensive than a court trial or other processes of negotiation and resolution. The mediators who are contracted under the Vermont Family Court Mediation Program are able to adjust their fee depending upon your household income and other qualifications.

Mediation is not for everyone. If either party feels fearful or terribly intimidated by the other, because of past or current psychological or physical abuse, then mediation is not appropriate. If either party is engaging in habitual substance abuse (such as alcohol or drugs), mediation may not be helpful.

You can learn more about mediation from the mediation pamphlet available in the Family Court, or call: 1-800-622-6359 or at [www.VermontJudiciary.org/mediation/](http://www.VermontJudiciary.org/mediation/)

#### **Parent coordination**

In cases where there is great conflict between parents, the court may order Parent Coordination. Parent Coordination is a child-centered process in which trained professionals make recommendations to the parents and judge regarding parent-child contact if the parents are unable to agree.

You can learn more about this program by contacting the Vermont Family Court Mediation Program at 1-800-622-6359.

#### **Family access and supervised visitation services**

Family access refers to a range of programs and services that can be offered to high-conflict families in order to help parents and children sustain and/or re-estab-

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lish their relationships. These include un-monitored parent/child contact time on-site at a service provider, monitored pick-up and drop-offs (also known as “exchanges”), and monitored parent/child contact, either on- or off-site. Monitored parent/child contact is the most frequently used family access service, and is what is commonly known as “supervised visitation.” It is the contact time between a non-residential (non-custodial) parent and one or more children in the presence of a third person who is responsible for observing and seeking to ensure the safety of those involved.

Call the Family Access program nearest you for information on referrals, service hours, the intake process, and fees.

- Lamoille Family Center Supervised Child Access Program (Morrisville): 802-888-5229
- Supervised Visitation Program @ WomenSafe (Middlebury): 802-388-6783
- Family Tree Access Center (Rutland): 800-668-8272
- Family Time (Bennington): 802-442-7007
- Emerge Family Advocates (White River Jct.): 802-296-7663
- Parents and Children Together (Brattleboro): 802-258-4668
- All About Kids (Franklin County): 802-933-6120
- Kids Place (Orange County): 802-728-9506 x123

### Home study

The purpose of a Home Study is to develop information helpful to parents and the court in making decisions about children. Its emphasis is on learning about each parent by studying his or her social history, home environment, and network of relationships with other persons connected with that home. It is particularly useful when the children’s relationship

with others in the parents’ lives (e.g., step-parents, half-siblings, parents’ significant others) may be an important factor. It is not intended to be a psychological study of family members. It is useful in determining which parent’s home offers a more suitable living environment for the child/ren, as it focuses on the impact of not just each parent but other household members on the child/ren’s development. The Court determines who will pay the cost.

### Special-purpose evaluations/forensic evaluations:

*Special-purpose evaluations:* Qualified professional evaluators perform evaluations focused on specific issues using techniques particular to that field. Examples include mental health status examinations of one or more parties, or substance abuse assessment evaluations.

*Forensic evaluations* are conducted by psychiatrists or psychologists trained in these procedures. The professional is a neutral third party appointed by the court to conduct the evaluation from the perspective of what is in the best interests of the children. Evaluators file a detailed report with the court and may be called by the parties to testify at additional cost to the parties. Forensic evaluations are costly, and will be ordered under circumstances indicating a need for information available only through mental health professionals trained in forensic evaluation techniques.

### Guardian ad Litem

When parents can’t come to an agreement on how they will continue to parent their child, the judge may appoint a Guardian ad Litem to act as an independent parental advisor and advocate whose goal is to safeguard the child’s best interests. The Guardian ad Litem is a trained and supervised volunteer who may be an attorney

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but shall not serve as the child's attorney. The Guardian ad Litem will meet with the child and others necessary for an understanding of the issues and provide assistance to the parents in resolving their parenting conflicts. If the parents are unable to resolve their conflicts, the Guardian ad Litem will state to the court their position and reasons therefore, on what is in the child's best interests. A Guardian ad Litem position must be based on the evidence in the record.

### Vermont Family Court Project

Four counties have been designated "Project Courts": Bennington, Caledonia, Chittenden, and Washington. The procedures in these courts are slightly different, and programs are available that may not yet be statewide. Ask the clerk for the information sheet on "Innovative Court Programs" to learn more about this.

## Legal representation

### Hiring an attorney

You may hire an attorney to help work out the agreements with your partner or to represent you if agreements cannot be reached. The following offer information or referrals to attorneys:

- The Vermont Bar Association Lawyer Referral Program (1-800-639-7036) has listings of attorneys who accept Family Law cases.
- Legal Aid, Inc., VT: 1-800-889-2047.
- Legal Services Law Line of Vermont, Inc.: 1-800-639-8857.
- Volunteer Lawyers Project has attorneys willing to give a consultation for a small fee: 1-800-639-8857.
- Several counties also offer free legal clinics.

### Choosing an attorney

- Look for an attorney with experience in family matters.
- Go to Family Court and watch the lawyers

in the courtroom. Interview several before deciding on one. You want a person who will take the time to find out what is important to you.

- Lawyers may have reduced fees or no fees for the first interview.
- Choose someone who understands the need for a continuing relationship between the parents until the child is an adult. "Winning in court" may be a big loss in the long run.
- Ask friends who have been through the process what they liked or didn't like about their lawyer.
- Choose someone who listens to your needs, desires, and concerns, and answers your questions in a way you can understand.

### Representing yourself

In Vermont, you are not required to have an attorney represent you in Family Court. The decisions you make have important consequences, so you may want to obtain legal advice. **All parties representing themselves are ordered by the Court to attend a Pro Se Litigant Education Program before they appear in court to pursue their claims (except for Relief from Abuse or Child Support hearings).**

*Pro Se* is a legal term that means you do not have a lawyer representing you in court. A one and a half hour program is held each month and is conducted by an attorney who regularly practices in Family Court. The purpose of this course is to educate litigants about the following: their responsibilities while representing themselves, courtroom etiquette and general family court procedures, and services available through outside agencies to help with problems affecting families. Anyone may attend these courses, and the program is free.

Please see family court pamphlet #18: *I will represent myself in court: What are my*

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responsibilities? What is expected of the Pro Se Spouse?

### Attorneys for children

In some family cases, including post-judgment filings, the court appoints an attorney to represent the interests of a minor child. Examples include cases in which the parents have significant factual disagreements over whether a child has been physically or sexually abused by a party or household member, or when there are indications that a child has substantial physical or psychological problems that the parents do not appear to be addressing in a responsible manner, or when parents appear focused on their own needs and not those of the children.

## Counseling

### Finding a counselor

Counseling and psychotherapy are often helpful in coping with the stresses and challenges of parenting and restructuring your family and your life. It is not a sign of weakness to consult with a counselor or therapist to help sort out feelings and analyze alternatives. Many healthy, competent people choose counseling in times of transition. You may get counseling for yourself, for your child, for both of you, for you and your cooperative partner, or for your entire family.

Psychologists, counselors, psychotherapists, clinical mental health counselors, clinical social workers, marriage and family counselors, pastoral counselors, psychiatrists, and others provide counseling services.

Cost is often a limiting factor for professional counseling. Some HMOs and insurance programs cover the cost. Some counselors offer sliding fee scales, which charge according to your resources. In Vermont, availability is also a problem in many rural communities.

*Important note:* When one person has physically, sexually, or emotionally abused the other parent or the child/ren, including the abuser in interventions such as family counseling is inappropriate as it may place the victim in danger of further abuse.

### Choosing a counselor

- Ask for a referral from your primary care health professional, your child's school counselor, your pastor, a friend or acquaintance who has had a good experience with counseling, the Vermont Association for Mental Health, your county's Community Mental Health Agency, your attorney, your mediator, your local abuse prevention program or crisis service, the Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services, etc.
- The Yellow Pages provide contact information under Counselors, Psychologists, Psychotherapists, Social Workers, and under Physicians-Psychiatrists.
- It is important that you feel comfortable with the person you will see. Interview potential counselors. Find out about their credentials, how they work, and whether they can work with you.
- Choose one who answers your questions in an honest, straightforward way.
- Choose one with appropriate training and experience, who is licensed to practice in Vermont.

### Vermont support services

Domestic Violence Hotline:  
1-800-228-7395

Health and Human Services  
Information and Referral:  
Dial: 211

Parent to Parent:  
1-800-800-4005

Prevent Child Abuse:  
1-800-CHILDREN (1-800-244-5373)  
pcavt@together.net

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Relief from Abuse, after hours:  
1-800-540-9990

Runaways:  
See your phone book for Youth  
Services number in your county

Social Security, SSI, Medicare:  
1-800-772-1213

South Royalton Legal Clinic of  
Vermont Law School:  
802-763-8303

UVM Extension:  
1-866-860-1382,  
[www.uvm.edu/extension/cope/](http://www.uvm.edu/extension/cope/)

Vermont Family Court Mediation  
Program:  
1-800-622-6359  
[www.VermontJudiciary.org/mediation/](http://www.VermontJudiciary.org/mediation/)

Vermont Lawyer Referral Service:  
1-800-639-7036

Vermont Legal Aid, Disability  
Law Project:  
1-800-769-7459

Vermont Network Against Domestic  
Violence and Sexual Assault:  
802-223-1302

Vermont Volunteer Lawyers Project,  
Legal Services Law Line of Vermont, Inc.:  
1-800-639-8857

Vermont Office of Child Support:  
1-800-786-3214

Vermont Student Assistance Corpora-  
tion (VSAC):  
1-800-642-3177

Other services and helplines can be found at  
the beginning of your phone book.

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## Web sites for families in transition

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[www.uvm.edu/extension/cope](http://www.uvm.edu/extension/cope)  
*Coping with Separation and Divorce Program*  
A seminar schedule for all sites in Vermont is  
posted for three months on this page. There  
are links to other Web pages for parenting,  
divorce-, and dissolution-related information.

<http://www.VermontJudiciary.org/>  
The Vermont Judiciary Web site

[www.uptoparents.org](http://www.uptoparents.org)  
[www.proudtoparent.org](http://www.proudtoparent.org)  
These confidential sites are interactive and  
personalized helping parents focus on their  
children's needs and the future. *Uptoparents* is  
for divorcing and divorced parents; *proudtopa-*  
*rent* is for parents never married to each other.

These web resources are available at no charge  
so dive in and get some help!

### *Parenting*

[www.parenting247.org](http://www.parenting247.org)  
This is a "one-stop" source for news, infor-  
mation, and advice on parenting and family  
life from University of Illinois Extension. De-  
signed for parents and grandparents of chil-  
dren from birth through adolescence, it pro-  
vides feature articles with research-based in-  
formation, newsletters, and recommendations  
to the best parenting resources on the web.

[www.cfw.tufts.edu](http://www.cfw.tufts.edu)  
Tufts University child and family web guide  
is a directory that evaluates, describes and  
provides links to hundreds of sites containing  
child development research and practical ad-  
vice. Topics are selected on the basis of parent  
recommendations: They cover all ages.

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[www.cyfernet.org](http://www.cyfernet.org)

Children Youth and Families Education and Research Network provide research-based information, tools and a wide range of resources on early childhood, school-age children, teens, parent/family issues. It provides an easy to use search engine; type divorce in and have access to almost 100 articles covering a range of topics.

[www.kidshealth.org](http://www.kidshealth.org)

The KidsHealth team of top-notch editors and medical reviewers keep this site packed with information on emotional, developmental, and medical issues of children and families. KidsHealth has separate areas for kids, teens, and parents—each with its own design, age-appropriate content, and tone. The Dealing with Feelings section for kids has articles about coping with divorce and step family issues.

[www.stepfam.org](http://www.stepfam.org)

The Stepfamily Association of America sites offers sections on stepfamily research, reviews of books and frequently asked questions about stepfamily life.

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## Reading lists

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### *For parents and adult children*

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Klein, N. *Taking Sides*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1974. (Ages 12 and up. A girl moves into adolescence at time of her parents' divorce; deals with parents' dating.)

Krasny-Brown, L. and M. Brown. *Dinosaurs Divorce: A Guide for Changing Families*. Boston: Joy Street Books, 1986. (Grade 6 and up. Illustrated with a dinosaur family, story talks about divorce, parent contact, and step-families. Can be read to younger children.)

Krementz, Jill. *How it Feels When Parents Divorce*. New York: Knopf, 1984. (Grade 4 and up. Boys and girls, ages seven to sixteen, share their feelings about their parents' divorce. Photographs and interview style.)

List, J. *The Day the Loving Stopped: A Daughter's View of Her Parents' Divorce*. New York: Seaview Books, 1980. (Ages 12 and up. The adult author talks about her childhood experiences with divorce in her family.)

LeShan, E. *What's Going to Happen to Me? When Parents Separate and Divorce*. New York: Aladdin Books, 1978. (Several anecdotes about children dealing with divorce; takes a positive approach.)

Navarra, T. *Playing It Smart: What to Do When You're on Your Own*. New York: Baron's, 1989. (Grades 6 to 9. Practical advice for latchkey children. Parents can read to younger children.)

Naylor, P. *No Easy Circle*. New York: Follet Press, 1972. (Ages 12 and up. Teenage girl experiences problems with peers as well as parents because of her parents' divorce.)

Newfield, M. *A Book for Jordan*. New York: Atheneum, 1975. (Grades 3 to 6. Fiction about a nine-year-old girl dealing with her parents' separation, complicated by distance.)

Richards, A. and I. Willis. *How to Get It Together When Your Parents Are Coming Apart*. New York: Bantam Books, 1976. (Ages 12 and up. Covers most divorce issues of concern to teens.)

Rofes, E., editor. *The Kid's Book of Divorce: By, For and About Kids*. New York: Vintage Books, 1981. (Ages 12 and up. Teens share their views about divorce.)

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Dragonwagon, Crescent. *Always, Always*. New York: McMillan, 1984. (A little girl discovers that although her parents are divorced, it doesn't change their love for her.)

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Girard, Linda and Judith Friedman. *At Daddy's on Saturdays*. Morton Grove, Illinois: Albert Whitman and Co, 1987.

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Hiegaard, Marge. *When Mom and Dad Separate*. Minneapolis: Woodland Press, 1991. (Book to draw in.)

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# Part 5.

## Seminar notes

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