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Helping your kids through any divorce

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Chapter 1: When Will I See My Kids?

Kids have a right to love both parents. Give them the opportunity.

Children need a meaningful relationship with both parents.

Park your ego. This is about what is best for your children. Children need consistency and predictability, so a consistent arrangement works best.

Day-to-Day

A Family Specialist can help you develop a time-sharing arrangement that works for your family and recognizes your child's personal and developmental needs. Usually the Family Specialist is part of the Collaborative Process, which is an effective way of resolving issues without having to go to court.

Be flexible when special events or opportunities for the children to participate in an activity arises. As the children mature and their needs change, you may have to change the time-sharing arrangements.

Custody determines how major decisions about the children will be made. It does not relate to the amount of time each parent spends with the kids. **Joint custody** means both you and your spouse will make the major decisions together. **Sole custody** means only one parent will make the major

decisions and the other parent has the right to information about the kids.

Major decisions include non-emergency health care decisions, the school they will attend, religious training they will be exposed to and activities they will be involved in.

The-day-to-day decisions are in the hands of the parent caring for them at the time. There is a trend towards joint custody, as many believe that children benefit from having both parents involved. Although it may be difficult to imagine working cooperatively with your spouse, it usually happens in time. If your situation is a high conflict case then perhaps sole custody is appropriate. The reality is that your parenting will evolve over time regardless of the title you use.

Many spouses choose to divide the time spent with the children. Often, it is one week with each parent.

In this case, social workers advise that the best transition day is Sundays, as Monday is a structured school day.

In other arrangements, children reside primarily at one home and spend time with the other parent on a regular basis, such as every second weekend and one day during the week.

Clubs, Sports and Interests

You and your spouse must find a realistic balance between the children's school and extra-curricular activities, your work schedules and your availability to care for the children. Whatever you decide, it's important to maintain consistency and predictability for the children sake. What about the holidays?

Special Occasions

Children enjoy the prospect of celebrating a special occasion twice, so don't focus on having special occasions twice: two birthdays, two Christmases, two Easters and two Thanksgivings. So, don't worry about having the particular day. It will work out.

Sometimes summer vacation is divided equally, for example, two weeks alternating. While others will agree that the regular time-sharing regime will apply but each will get two or three weeks of vacation time with the children upon certain notice. You may agree that Father's Day is with father and Mother's Day is with mother or you may just ignore these days and let them fall in accord with the regular schedule.

Some feel it is important to see their child on their birthday each year and make special provisions. Others celebrate birthdays whenever their child is with them.

What if My Spouse isn't Cooperating?

Remember to treat your spouse as you would like them to treat you. Although your spouse may not always reciprocate, always take the high road and do the right thing for your children's sake.

Flexibility is important even with a consistent and predictable schedule. If special opportunities arise that would benefit your children, you may trade some time with your spouse. For example if your spouse's parents have tickets for the

children to attend a show, trade that night for another night so the kids can attend the special event.

Chapter 2: Who Can Help Me?

Should We Get a Counselor for the Children?

Often children benefit from having their own counselor. A counselor is a neutral and supportive party who keeps their conversations with the children confidential.

Divorce is a difficult transition for children. In time, they may not need the counselor to deal with divorce-related issues, but other issues may arise. For example, teenagers certainly have many issues and often an allergic reaction to anything their parents say. A counselor can help them through challenging years.

Initially, during the divorce, they may attend more frequently due to their need. Over time, they may go two or three times a year. Costs not covered by a health benefit plan would be shared in proportion to you and your spouse's income or shared equally.

Will We Use a Family Specialist?

We recommend our clients work with a Family Specialist. They are trained professionals who can help you and your spouse craft a parenting plan in the best interests of your children. As parenting experts, they are aware of the latest research on the developmental needs of children, especially those going through a divorce. They do more than establish a time-sharing regime, they can help you plan for potential future challenges, such as introducing new partners, the

teenage years, how you will communicate regarding issues and challenges that may arise.

A Family Specialist:

- Is **trained** to handle the needs of children, especially those whose parents are going through a divorce. They help you and your spouse develop a parenting plan that works for your children.
- **Helps** develop an agreement on the time your children will spend with each of you on a regular basis and over holidays but the Family Specialist does much more.
- **Brings the voice** of the children to the negotiations about parenting. Often, the Family Specialist will meet with your children to determine their particular needs and wishes.
- **Educates** you and your spouse on the most recent research regarding the developmental needs of the children, especially those whose parents are separating and divorcing.

A parenting plan may include references on how you will deal with sensitive issues in the future to minimize future conflicts. For example, how and when new partners will be introduced to the children.

Can We Afford This?

The cost of a Family Specialist is substantially less than the cost for each of you to pay for a lawyer. Further, the cost of the Family Specialist can be shared by you and your spouse

resulting in a cost-effective way to resolve parenting issues

Like a mediator, the Family Specialist will help you and your spouse discover your core concerns around parenting so you can develop a parenting plan that meets those core concerns. As a neutral and objective expert, your Family Specialist will ensure that the parenting plan is in the best interests of your children.

When the Family Specialist has completed the parenting plan, it will be sent to the lawyers. Your lawyer will review it with you and offer advice. If acceptable to both parties, it will be appended to the separation agreement and become a legally binding agreement.

Chapter 3: What Can I Do to Help My Kids Through This?

We often point our clients to Sue Cook's wonderful wisdom. She is one of the most insightful voices we know of and an expert on guiding children (and their parents through divorce).

Cook is a respected blogger and the owner and operator of the Family TLC Family Therapy and Life Coaching Group (www.FamilyTLC.ca).

We hope you will use these particularly helpful tips to help teens going through this tough time.

10 Tips for Building Resilience in Children and Teens

Help your children develop resilience through separation and divorce. Resilience, the ability to cope with stressful situations, thoughts, and actions are things that can be learned over time.

1. Make Connections: Connecting with others provides social support and strengthens resilience. One way to foster a connection is to build a strong family network to help support your child. Also, teach your child to make friends. Friendship will help develop empathy, the ability to feel another person's pain, and this will deepen your child's

connections.

2. Help your child to help others: By helping others, children who feel helpless gain a sense of empowerment and accomplishment. Engage your child in age-appropriate volunteer work, or ask for assistance on a task that can be managed easily.

3. Maintain a daily routine: Children crave structure in their lives and a regular routine is both predictable and comforting. Encourage your child to develop his or her own routines. They'll be more likely to stick to the routine if they are part of the decision making process.

4. Take a break: Children are overloaded with information that may sometimes upset them. Conversations, the internet, the news, or thoughts and discussions about separation and divorce can be overwhelming. Make sure your child has the opportunity to take a break.

5. Teach your child self-care: Be a good example and teach your child about healthy eating, exercise, and rest and relaxation. Your child will be more balanced and better deal with stressful times.

6. Move towards your goals: Praise, even for baby steps toward a goal, will allow your child to focus on an accomplishment rather than what they have yet to accomplish. This can help build the resilience needed to move forward in the face of a challenge.

7. Nurture a positive self-view: Teach your child to see the humour in life and have the ability to laugh at themselves. Remind them of the times they've successfully handled past hardships and help them understand that past challenges helps build the strength needed to handle future challenges.

8. Keep things in perspective and maintain a hopeful outlook: An optimistic and positive outlook enables your child to see the good things in life and keep going even in the hardest of times. Although your child may be too young to consider a long-term outlook on his/her own, help them to see that there is a future beyond the current situation and that the future can be good.

9. Look for opportunities for self-discovery: Show your children that hardship can teach them what they are made of. Tough times are often the times when children learn the most about themselves

10. Accept that change is part of living: Transition is often frightening for children and teens. Help your child see that change is part of life and new goals can replace goals that have become unattainable.

Chapter 4: How Do I Maintain My Relationship With My Kids?

The truth is that most parents are able to maintain strong relationships with their children after separation. In fact, some are able to strengthen their relationships with their kids because they are focused solely on their children when they are with them. It can be a challenge but here are some ideas:

Use Skype. This is a free internet-based video conferencing system. All that's required is high-speed internet access and a webcam (they aren't expensive) on each computer. It's almost like being in the same room and is especially good with younger children.

Use email, texting, Facebook or whatever internet-based system your child may be using. Even a brief text message exchange can make you both feel connected but don't interfere with your ex-spouse's time with the children.

Schedule regular telephone calls. They may be brief but they keep you connected.

Go to your child's extracurricular activities as much as possible including their hockey practices and games, music recitals, dance lessons and school field trips. Even if you don't speak to your child during or after the event, it will show them that you care and give you something to talk about next time they are in your care.

Focus on your kids. Keep your own activities to a minimum so you can really pay attention to your kids when they are with you. If you have some chores to do, do them with your kids. Grocery shopping and cooking with kids can be fun and gives them good life lessons.

As your children get older, their friends will become more important. **Invite your kids' friends to do activities** with you and your kids. Bring them on vacations with you or weekend camping trips. If you isolate your children from their friends, they won't want to keep spending time with you.

Teenagers are supposed to push back. **Don't smother them.** Let them become more independent and responsible. It's normal and healthy.

Be the adult. Don't share with your children your own emotional struggles. Let your children focus on being kids. If you need to speak to someone about your own issues, get your own Divorce Coach.

Don't get into arguments with your ex spouse in front of the children. They will resent you even if you are in the right. Either discuss issues with your ex when the kids aren't around or are asleep, or use email so the kids won't see or hear it. Some parents exchange a parenting journal when the children are exchanged. It contains important information about the children and is used to dialogue about important parenting issues.

Spend as much time with your children as possible. If you can avoid the use of babysitters or daycare, do it. If you can't care for your children for a longer period of time, offer the extra time to your ex spouse to care for them instead of using a babysitter.

Chapter 5: What Happens When I Meet Someone New? When do I Tell the Kids?

This is probably front and centre in your mind the moment you become interested in somebody new.

First of all, be happy! You're starting a new stage in your life and that means opening the door to let new people in. So enjoy the fact that you've found someone. Take the time to really enjoy each other. You've earned it!

Now of course, that raises the question of how to handle this with the kids. You might feel like you're walking on eggshells with your kids after the divorce and you're not sure either of you can handle this conversation. The good news is that if you're worried about this, you're taking it seriously.

Sue Cook wrote a great blog called [Introducing a New Partner to Your Children](#), to address these same fears.

She says, "For children whose biological parents are not together, the introduction of a new person may create what we call a loyalty bind. 'How do I accept the new man in Mom's life without betraying my Dad?'"

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