

DivorcEd I

A Booklet For Separating, Divorced and Remarried Adults

DivorcEd I is the first in this series of **divorce education booklets** focusing on the issues and problems faced by separating, divorced and remarried families and their members. The theme of the series is to provide advice and suggestions that are quick, informative, direct and to the point. No one is busier in their day-to-day lives than the separating and divorced parent, especially in the early stages of the transitions faced.

It is hard for us to know in an exact fashion what is considered to be “normal” in separation and divorce (what we can typically expect in a separation and divorce) and what is *atypical* or unusual for families and their members to experience. Ultimately no one but the individuals themselves can be an expert on their own family in the turmoil of these life transitions. However, we do know more now than we did 20 some odd years ago when I began practising social work with families, couples and their individual members or, even 15 years ago when I first began working with families of separation, divorce and remarriage.

This series is designed to:

- , define issues, problems & solutions
- , advise adults as individuals and as parents
- , be helpful
- , allow you to take *your expertise* (about your life & family) and hopefully enhance it with insights, thoughts and ideas
- , be encouraging

This first booklet, **DivorcEd I** contains the following:

Part 1. How Do Kids Feel When Their Parents Separate and Divorce?

Section i

The Alphabet of Feelings

Section ii

The Annotated Alphabet of Feelings

Section iii

Your Copy of The Alphabet of Feelings

Part 2. Advice To Parents About Divorce

Section i

The Top Ten List For Parents & Adults

Part 3. Constructions And Getting Unstuck

Section i

“Love Your Kids More Than.....?”

“The mother is talking.....?”

Part 1. Section i :

How Do Kids Feel When Their Parents Separate and Divorce?

**CHILDREN OF SEPARATION
AND DIVORCE:**

ALPHABET OF FEELINGS

When parents separate and eventually divorce, we soon turn our attention to the children to discover and explore how they are coping with the transitions in their family. Initially this can be difficult for parents to do because of their own pain and the concrete tasks and realities associated with separating. When we do get to kid's feelings we're often surprised to hear that there are some positive or "good" feelings as well as the expected negative or "prickly feelings". Here's a sample to give you the scope and range of feelings kids talk about.

HEY KIDS, HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT YOUR PARENTS' SEPARATION & DIVORCE????????????????

A ANXIOUS, ANGRY

B BAD

C CURIOUS, CRAZY

D DUMB

E EXCITED

F FRIGHTENED

G GREAT, GUILTY

H HAPPY

I INTERESTED

J JEALOUS

K KICKED

L LOVED

M MESSED UP

N (NOT SO) NORMAL

O OLD

P PUSHED AROUND

Q QUESTIONING

R RESPONSIBLE

S STINKY, SAD

T TROUBLED

U UNLOVED

V VERY SAD

W WEARY

X X-HAUSTED

Y YANKED

Z ZONKED

CCC

Part 1. Section ii:

How Do Kids Feel When Their Parents Separate and Divorce?

HERE'S THE SAME LIST AGAIN, THIS TIME WITH SOME OF MY COMMENTS. WHEN I WAS BUSY RUNNING GROUPS FOR KIDS OF ALL AGES, THE DISCUSSION THAT RESULTED FROM DRAWING UP A LIST OF FEELINGS OFTEN TOLD A GREAT DEAL ABOUT THE SEPARATION AND DIVORCE EXPERIENCE FOR EACH OF THEM AND THEIR RESPECTIVE FAMILIES. HOPE THIS SECTION IS HELPFUL.

**CHILDREN OF SEPARATION AND
DIVORCE**

ALPHABET OF FEELINGS

ANNOTATED BY JOE RICH

A ANXIOUS, ANGRY

And boy, are they angry! “ I don’t like this.”

B BAD

Kids use fairly simple language, especially at a young age. “What kind of bad?” is usually a good question and leads to other feelings for the list (and to discuss!)

C CURIOUS, CRAZY

Crazy is a common feeling that goes with reorganization or these kinds of transitions. Curious is about feeling surprised and overwhelmed. What's next?

D DUMB

Some kids think they're dumb for not seeing this coming or not knowing what to do. They also say this is "dumb" as in the whole idea and series of events. Kids say dumb more than adults do. It's a kid's word for disapproval rather than meant to be used to imply "stupid".

E EXCITED

For many, divorce has moments of adventure (new people, new possessions, more travel, etc.). Some parents have made the events of separation "exciting" to help kids cope and feel some level of optimism.

F FRIGHTENED

Almost all kids and certainly in every group of kids there is discussion of feeling frightened, scared, and / or unsure. For most, this is entering into the unknown.

G GREAT, GUILTY

Great usually comes up when we get to the discussion around 2 Christmases or 2 birthday parties, or being spoiled. Guilty tends to come up with older kids who are more willing and able to talk about the feeling that they have some fault in the demise of the family unit.

H HAPPY

“No more mom and dad fighting” is happy for lots of kids.

I INTERESTED

“Now, we’re interested in our parents, their relationship, how things are going so we can have the information we need. Before separation why bother listening to them? Now, information is important and affects us!”

J JEALOUS

Jealous of kids who have parents who aren’t separated.

K KICKED

L LOVED

Yes, they still feel loved and talk about it!

M MESSED UP

They say this because many have heard this. They think they are supposed to feel messed up. Many talk about this as one of the ways you feel at certain times, not all the time. Older kids think this goes away.

N (NOT SO) NORMAL

In spite of the high rate of divorce, and the reality that kids know lots of kids who live through separation, when their own parents separate kids still feel they are not normal. Lots of kids don't tell others about their parent's separation for long periods of time and worry about what others will think.

O OLD

It makes you feel old. You find out lots of stuff earlier than you should about life, money, sex, marriage, and in-laws (to name a few). In some cases kids say they feel old and have a sense of regret that they have missed or are missing a piece of their childhood. For some (especially some adolescents) feeling old is a good feeling because it helps them feel adult-like and all grown up.

P PUSHED AROUND	Custody, courts, moving around, told what to do, etc..
Q QUESTIONING	Lots of this. Both real questions and resistance too (Why do <i>I</i> have to do that????).
R RESPONSIBLE	Especially true for the oldest or most capable sibling or in some cases the female sibling who takes on responsibilities in visits, helping out, babysitting, confidante to parent, etc. Some kids will link this to feeling burdened or used.
S STINKY, SAD	Lots of “s” feelings!
T TROUBLE	And... troubling...
U UNLOVED	It’s a hard time to parent through. Kids may mistake disinterest due to a parents feeling overwhelmed as “unloved.”
V VERY SAD	Watch out for depressed!
W WEARY	Separation and divorce make life very busy, hectic and chaotic. People get particularly tired in the early adjustment.
X X-HAUSTED	Life is busy!

Y YANKED

Being asked to take sides can really feel yanked!

Z ZONKED

As in “zonked over the head”

XXX

Part 1. Section iii:

How Do Kids Feel When Their Parents Separate and Divorce?

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN...

ALPHABET OF FEELINGS....

Go ahead... Ask your kids.. Be ready.....

So Kids, How do you (did you) feel about our separation and divorce??

A _____

B _____

C _____

D _____

E _____

F _____

G _____

H _____

I _____

J _____

K _____

L _____

M _____

N _____

O _____

P _____

Q _____

R _____

S _____

T _____

U _____

V _____

W _____

X _____

Y _____

Z _____

Once your child (or children) has responded with their feelings, be sure to look over the feelings they have suggested and;

- avoid reacting or criticizing
- comment without judging
- ask questions like “What kind of feeling bad?”
- look for any positive feelings and ask about them
- treat their feelings as private or confidential
- consult a professional if their responses have raised any concerns

Remember, these are feelings, not facts. They pass, they change, they can be felt in varying degrees. Don't judge and don't defend yourself or others to “explain the feelings away.” Sometimes just telling your parents your feelings can start to make it all feel better.....

CCC

TOP 10 OF

PARENTING THROUGH SEPARATION AND DIVORCE

Here's my top 10 suggestions for parenting through separation and divorce. Hope they are helpful reminders. I've written a few comments, I couldn't help myself!

1. DON'T USE THE CHILDREN AS A MESSENGER

Avoid having kids deliver things. This includes:

- * cheques (or anything money related)
- * verbal messages (you tell your mom/dad
- * information (Whose car is that? How did your mom pay for that?..)

2. DON'T BAD MOUTH THE OTHER PARENT, THEIR FRIENDS, THEIR FAMILY, ETC...

Even if they bad mouth you! Or their family bad mouths you! It is not a good thing to do. Ultimately, you will find out that when your children hear you say something bad about *their* mom or dad, it often winds up that they don't like the person who is saying it (Remember the old "your mother

wears army boots...”). My own mom always said “ *If you don’t have something nice to say (really) then say nothing*”, this strikes me as good advice in this situation.

Just focus on not saying bad mouthed things. No one wins. Try not to over-invest in demonstrating what a lousy parent your ex can be. If you have real concerns for the children’s well-being then be in touch with the authorities in your community and discuss possible actions to be taken. Just venting is of no use and causes further difficulties.

REMEMBER... THE WALLS HAVE EARS..... WHAT THEY HEAR YOU SAY TO OTHERS (YOUR FRIENDS, PARENTS, ETC.) COUNTS AS BAD MOUTHING.... BE CAUTIOUS.... GO OUT TO VENT.

3. KEEP THE FINANCES TO YOURSELF.

Too many kids know the rent, the hydro bill, support payment amounts, schedules of payment, details of legal agreements, and lots of other financial stuff . It scares them, often unnecessarily. Pay if you said you were going to pay and keep track if you said you would keep track. Don’t burden the kids (or their childhood) with separation and divorce conflicts. This is not teaching them about money or the real world. Try things like allowance and paper routes and food shopping together to teach that stuff.

4. BE A GOOD LISTENER, ESPECIALLY TO KID'S FEELINGS.

Read at least 2 books on how children cope with separation and divorce in their families (this could count for one!) and this should help you figure out what to listen for. You may also want to look at [How To Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk](#) by Faber and Maslich (in addition to the 2 books on separation and divorce!). There's some homework to do here.

5. TELL THE KIDS IT'S NOT THEIR FAULT, THIS IS BETWEEN MOM AND DAD.

Yes, kids think it's their fault and sometimes they think that they can reverse the separation if they behave better, do better in school, stop fighting with siblings, etc. Tell them it's not their fault, I really mean it. Say *"This is between mom and dad. It is not your fault. It is our adult problem to solve."* It's normal for them to feel this way and we need to reassure them. Divorce is an adult problem.

6. TELL CHILDREN POSITIVE THINGS ABOUT THEIR LIVES IN THIS FAMILY.

In it's early stages, separating can prove to be a very painful and negative time. Kids need to know that the present situation is not the sum total of their life in this family. Throwing out pictures with your ex in them that have happy family memories attached is detrimental to their well-being. Try to keep these family pictures and memories for you and

them for times when they need to see life before separation, before conflict, to see who they are and where they came from. Most separations and divorces are the end of something that at some points was a good relationship or family or series of events. Kids need to know they come from good. They need to hear that the pleasant memories are as real at this point as the unpleasant memories.

As painful as it might be, I highly recommend making a memory box as a place to store the things that might be painful to have around. Years later parents are happy they have done this for their children and sometimes for themselves. For example, I tell adults to remind themselves that “the wedding photos now belong to the children” and to store them appropriately.

See yourself as the parent (not the wife/husband or “ex”) when you try to be positive.(See Part 3. Constructions and Getting Unstuck)

7. DON'T OVERCOMPENSATE OUT OF GUILT OR FOR ANY OTHER REASON.

Overcompensation or over-indulging your children at this time generally means that in addition to the issues and problems of the separation you now have the problems of overcompensating too. Try not to overcompensate at these points. We tend to do this with kids when we feel guilty or are hoping that saying yes to everything will make them happy or forget their troubles. This proves to be a very short-term solution to a long-term reality. Try to give your kids what they need (reassurance, time, affection, optimism) during these transitions rather than what they want.

8. LOOK UP AND REMEMBER THIS IS LONG-TERM.

Yes, this is forever. We'll be separated and divorced through lots of events and developmental stages. Try and keep a long-term perspective and try to not get caught in the moment.

Things change and continue to change as both your lives change and the children enter different developmental stages. For example, a four year fight for a custody and access agreement for your two and a three year old means it is put in place when they are six and seven! Doesn't make much sense. Look up.

We'll have to keep up as the children grow and change. This will involve change and the telling and re-telling of how events took place through the years. For example, the answer to "Why are you guys divorced?" like the famous "Where do babies come from?" will need to be answered and readdressed throughout the years. Don't think of it as answered and forgotten. The telling and the re-telling are crucial.

Don't get caught in the moment. Lots of things like agreements and questions will be visited and re-visited along the way.

9. MAKE CO-PARENTING A GOAL.

Be realistic. Co-parenting needs to be built. Whatever it is today, tomorrow I'd like it to be better. Don't set your sights for the unrealistic. Make sure your kids are doing the best

they can. That's not always perfect. Make building this an on-going never ending project.

THIS PERSON NEEDS TO STOP BEING YOUR EX AND BEGIN BEING THE CO-PARENT OF YOUR CHILDREN.

10. DON'T USE THE CHILDREN AS A WEAPON. THIS IS NOT REALLY A WAR.

We **do** know, *less conflict equals better adjusted kids*. Really. Even if your ex is an *#~!!! and deserves it and blah..blah... Conflict is bad for kids. Make peace.

X

Easy to say. Tough to do. Try tackling one of these tips at a time. Get to 5/10 and take it from there. Get help. It's usually short term and useful at this time.

XXX

Part 3. Section i: Constructions and Getting Unstuck

SEPARATING IS A PROCESS: HELP! I'M STUCK

Separation and divorce is a process. It is NOT one event on a single day. Sometimes it feels like your marriage arrived at separation “all of a sudden” but in fact, this is rarely true. Most relationships evolve, and sometimes that evolution is to points of separation. Within every separation is a variety of separations. For example, within every marital separation the following relationship separations take place at varying speeds and degrees throughout the process:

- a financial separation
- a social separation
- a physical separation (living apart to varying degrees)
- a social separation
- a sexual & intimate separation
- an emotional separation
- a legal separation

and lots more.

All of these “separations within the separation” do not take place in any particular order or at any particular stage. This is why each couple’s separation is unique and they become “experts” on their own separation over time. Final moments in the overall separation process would mean for the most part all of these “separations within the separation” have taken place.

In this process called separation, one can get stuck. Moving through the stages and range of emotions encountered in separation (shock, surprise, denial, anger, guilt, sadness, depression and acceptance) one can find themselves stuck, unable to “get on with the separation” or the life ahead of them as a single adult. Being stuck at some points is worse than stuck at others. Perhaps the two most destructive spots to be stuck within are the frequently intense feelings of anger and/ or depression common to the separation experience. Moving through these stages in a separation is hard enough, being stuck in them can be torturous.

Constructions are ideas or thoughts we can build and use to move us through a painful process or to help us get unstuck from the feeling or the effects of feeling a particular way all the time. They are designed to be bold, straightforward and functional to the individual who may choose to use them. The two constructions that follow have been helpful to separating and divorced parents over the years. Each is quite different in its design and its effect on the “user.”

Construction One:

Love Your Children More Than You Hate Your Ex

This is for individuals who are stuck in the angry phase of their separation and divorce. They know they would like to move on, but they can't. Everything is about how bad, useless or negative, etc. the children's other parent is. They are unable to see that they are sabotaging their own relationship with their children by doing things that “make sense” to them but ultimately will be harmful to the children. They focus on who they hate, rather than who they love, and this is the foundation of many poor long-term decisions and at times behaviours for which they will be sorry about or embarrassed by in the future.

Here's an example:

One parent knows the date of an up-and-coming teacher/parent interview night. The other does not. The parent that knows is stuck in anger and out of this anger or hate, doesn't tell the other parent. The child has one parent at teacher/parent interview night, not both. As a result:

- the child suffers the fallout of the “not telling about the evening” and the conflict this event creates between parents
- the child has a teacher who has not met one of the parents and now sees them as the “uninvolved” parent and can't be as helpful in working with the child around homework, transitions between homes, etc.
- the child feels guilty for not telling the other parent them self and develops a plan for the future which makes them over-responsible for their lives and for making things work between the adults
- the child sees both parents in a negative light (again?) and still feels hopeless about not having parents who can co-parent.

Loving the children more than hating the ex may mean passing on information like this, in spite of how you feel about your ex.

Construction Two:

***The Mother Is Talking To The Father and/or
The Father Is Talking To The Mother***

Having two adults who have separated speak to one another can be a difficult job (both for the client and the therapist!).

Most couples after separation experience a high degree of conflict and, at the same time, are expected to continue parenting (and co-parenting) their children. Parenting is hard work at the best of times, but it can be especially difficult during your own experience of separation and divorce.

However, this is also a time when parenting effectively is critical to the child's well-being. For parents to successfully come together and to have constructive conversations and to co-parent, they must be able to identify when they are speaking to one another as the parent or co-parent and when they are speaking as the ex-husband and the ex-wife. This is no easy task.

To achieve this, the following may be useful to do or think about:

1) You will need to have a “parent voice” that you can begin to use in the discussion of matters related to parenting and co-parenting the children.

2) The topic of conversation will need to be things that only a set of devoted and dedicated parents need to talk about. Talk about kid

things. If you are at the door picking up, no comments about lovers, cheques not received, new cars, old flames, letters from the lawyer. Save this for ex-husband and ex-wife chats over the phone or at lunch meetings or at the mediator's office.

3) Work at it. Ask your ex to do this too. It is possible to differentiate between the conversations (topic, tone and language) of the ex-wife / ex-husband and the mother and father. Practice. Call back and when your ex answers, say something like "Sorry about the last call. This time the mother has a question for the dad. Can she speak to him?" Practice some more. Make it work for the kids. You won't wind up feeling better as an ex or about your ex, but the parent in you will be proud and will begin to understand....

Why is it that some people separate and still manage to do get along so well?

XXX