



*Make Prevention a CHOICE*

## **Separation And Divorce In The Military Family: What Parents Can Do To Help Their Kids Cope (Part 2)**

Separation and divorce is difficult enough for adults. For children, it is more than an end to a marriage. It is the end of everything familiar to them. They have known nothing except life in the family you and your spouse has created.

As a parent, you will be the most important helper for your child as they cope in their own way with your divorce. These tips offer a way to see your divorce through their eyes. Understanding their experience is the first step to helping them.

**SPEND TIME** with your child. Whether or not you are the custodial parent, your child needs your reassuring presence. Maintaining your relationship is extremely important to his or her future growth. Even if you live at a distance from your child, regular phone calls and letters are important.

**LISTEN** to your child's feelings. This could be difficult, especially if they say things that make you feel uncomfortable or guilty. But you are their most important support. They have their own feelings, which must be expressed. It will help if you are the one they can share them with. Try to listen without being defensive or judgmental. You do not have to "fix" how they feel. What they need is to feel understood by you.

**MAINTAIN** your child's routine as much as possible. Their sense of security and safety can be strengthened when their meals, play time, schoolwork and bedtimes are on a predictable schedule. With so much change forced on them by a separation from one of their parents, these routines can help to minimize an otherwise major disruption.

**AVOID** making your child part of the conflict between you and your spouse. Resist the urge to criticize your spouse in front of your child. Do not use your child as a messenger or "mail carrier". Keep your children out of the role of "confidant" for you. Talk to people your own age about the marriage and what made it fail. Even though your marriage is over, your child's relationship with his/her other parent continues. Respect it despite your own feelings.

## WATCH FOR . . .

- ◆ **Expressions of guilt by your child.** This shows up in statements such as “if I behaved better, mommy and daddy would still be together”. You can help your child by assuring him or her that they are not responsible for your marriage break up.
- ◆ **Efforts to reunite you and your spouse.** Your child could attempt this in many ways. They might try to make “bargains” about better behavior if you get back together. Or they may turn to such things as skipping school, shoplifting or other problem behaviors that will force the two of you to deal with him or her as a couple. In either case, your child needs to know the fate of your marriage is something he or she does not control.
- ◆ **Regressive or negative behavior.** Toddlers and younger children to about age 6 may return to infantile behavior such as bedwetting or thumbsucking. Pre-school and school age children may engage in aggressive behavior, especially at play. Complaints of physical ailments like headaches, stomachaches, etc may appear with no apparent physical cause. Older children may be depressed or have angry outbursts aimed at you. Remember that your kids are grieving your marriage in their own way. This will include phases like denial, bargaining, anger and depression. Handling these behaviors requires patience, self-assurance and outside support for you. Understanding why these behaviors are appearing helps. Avoid belittling the pre-school child for things like bedwetting. Patient reinforcement of more mature behavior is important. For school age children, your presence and listening ear are important. Allowing them to talk about their unhappy feelings is important. For adolescents, the support of friends and other adults can help them get past the moral judgments they will make on you.
- ◆ **Your own guilt feelings to emerge.** This shows up in impulses to be lax on normal discipline or routines or to buy unusual gifts or treats. The non-custodial parent is especially tempted to do this on visitation weekends, etc. Giving in to this temptation hurts the child for two reasons: 1) it gives the child the wrong message about how to cope with difficult things, and 2) opens the way for the child to manipulate you to his/her own advantage. Either way, this can be damaging to your relationship with your child in the long run. Instead, maintain your normal pattern of outings, gifts, discipline, etc. This is the best way to let your child maintain a steady course to recovery from a very difficult experience.

For further information about community resources regarding separation and divorce contact the Choice Behavioral Health Partnership Prevention and Wellness Department at:

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