

Family life in Alberta

- Alberta families in 2013:
 - 40.2% married (Canada 38.2%)
 - 7.9% living together (Canada 9.3%)
 - 14.5% single parent (Canada 16.3%)
- Nationally, number of unmarried relationships grew by 13.9% from 2006 to 2011, married by only 3.1%

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Divorce in Alberta

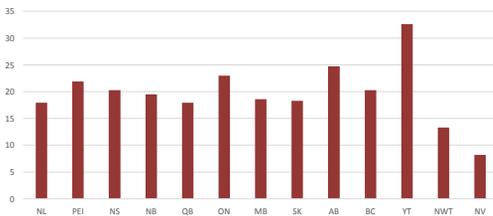
- Divorce rate 46.7% in 2008 (Canada 40.7%)
- Population engaged in court cases in 2012 and 2008:
 - Alberta 1.58% divorce 3.98% family
 - BC 1.11% divorce 3.23% family
 - Ontario 0.81% divorce 2.59% family
- 21.5% of Canadian children live in lone-parent families

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Canadian families: 2008

Divorce Rate per 10,000 Population



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When couples separate

- Moderate stress and anxiety
- Loss of identity
- Loss of financial security, stability and routine
- Fear for the future, uncertainty
- Shock, anger, confusion, sadness and depression, guilt and blame, resentment
- Grief

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Grief

- Kübler-Ross model of grief
 1. Denial ("This can't be happening to me!")
 2. Anger ("This isn't fair.")
 3. Bargaining ("I'll do anything to bring her back.")
 4. Depression ("There's no point in going on...")
 5. Acceptance ("It's going to be okay.")
- Model can be applied to any major loss

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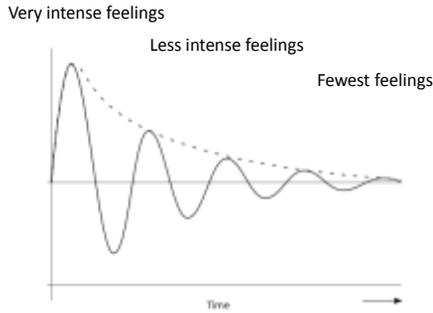


Grief

- Loss of a relationship is different than loss of a loved one, especially when the couple has children
- Grieving relationship loss is not a step-by-step process but waves of emotion that get smaller and less intense over time
- The opposite of love is... *indifference*

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When couples separate

- The traumatic separation:
 - unexpected discovery of betrayal
 - sudden announcement, out of the blue
- Shock, anger, confusion, sadness and depression, guilt and blame
 - anger at being at different stages of grief
 - disbelief, resentment
- Anger with leaver often reinforced by friends and family

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The bad separation

- Significant emotional distress, particularly anger, anxiety and fear
- Suddenly severed relationships with friends and family
- Dramatic and quick change from supportive relationship to combative relationship
- Immaturity, self-centred behaviour; inability to see the big picture and imagine the future

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The good separation

- Discussion about relationship ahead of time
- Able to cooperatively plan for future of separated family, prioritize children’s needs and wellbeing
- Minimal blaming, each able to accept own responsibility for end of relationship
- Support of friends and family through transition

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Children and separation

- Separation is distressing for all children, *this is a normal reaction*
- Impact varies depending on age and development of child, intensity of conflict
- Some children even *gain* from separation (independence, patience, compassion, ability to discuss feelings)

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Divorce can be awesome.

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Family breakdown

- Separation usually rocks child’s world; undermines sense of stability, security of relationships
- Children’s experience varies by
 - Age, level of maturity
 - Suddenness of separation
 - Degree of conflict between parents
 - Extent to which child informed of events

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Negative outcomes for children

- Mental health problems (depression, anxiety)
- Emotional problems (sadness, anger)
- School problems (falling behind, dropping out)
- Social problems (delinquency, criminality)
- Higher rates of substance use and abuse
- Diminished parent-child relationships
- Poor relationships as adults

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Children’s experience of separation

- **Infants** are aware of absence of a parent
 - Can’t separate parents’ anger at each other from anger at self
 - Negative emotions (hostility, depression, non-responsiveness) may displace warmth and security previously associated with parents
 - Will respond with confusion, anxiety, fear
 - Trust in environment, sense of security that needs will be met, first developmental milestone

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Children's experience of separation

- **Toddlers** are aware parent is missing but not why, may experience anxiety and setbacks
 - Will sense separation, may experience anger
 - Separation anxieties will be aggravated
- **Preschoolers** may believe they caused the separation and feel guilty as a result
 - May fear that since one parent left the other will too
 - May experience setbacks in milestones
 - Stubbornness may mislead

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Children's experience of separation

- **Children age 6 to 8** are much better at expressing feelings, but are also learning to hide and mask their feelings
 - Usually feel intensely sad about separation
 - Often reluctant to express anger toward a parent
 - May still believe they are responsible for separation; may believe they can fix things and undo the separation

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Children's experience of separation

- **Children age 9 to 12** will be angry about separation, may see separation as personal rejection
 - Likely to see as further destabilizing already changing world
 - Tend to reduce situation to extremes of black and white, blame "bad" parent for separation
 - Will be more vulnerable to need to belong, risk of delinquency, getting in with wrong crowd
 - Be wary of depression

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Children's experience of separation

- **Teenagers** will blame parents for separation and the change in their lives, be highly judgmental toward parent seen as responsible
 - Will not hesitate to exploit parents' conflict for own advantage, but separation may cast doubt about their own future relationships
 - May wish or be willing to act as parent's emotional support
 - May model parents' conflict resolution style
 - Be wary of withdrawal, depression

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Risk factors for children

- Stress of parents' separation
- Not being talked to about the separation
- Parent's mental health issues, substance abuse
- Unpredictable, inadequate parenting
- Reduced financial resources
- Loss of security and stability, loss of child's relationship with a parent
- *Ongoing conflict between parents*

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Symptoms and causes, and the risks for children

Conflict between parents



Conflict after separation

- Aggressive, perhaps violent, behaviour
- Verbal abuse, emotionally abusive behaviour
- Unable to communicate without arguing
- Deep, new distrust of other's motives
- Deep, new distrust of other's ability to parent
- Inclined to use court to resolve disputes
- Willing to posture, take extreme positions

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Things that make conflict worse

- Substance abuse, including during relationship
- Mental health issues
- Coercive, controlling relationship while together
- Behaviour during relationship reasonably causing mistrust, fear for child's wellbeing
- Unexpected separation, imbalance in decision-making about separation
- Bitter court proceedings

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Parents in high conflict

- Intense anger and bitterness
- Entrenched in conflict
- Distrustful and suspicious
- Contemptuous of other parent
- Polarized views on parenting disputes
- Focus is on parents' issues not child's issues
- Child used to express anger

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The effect of conflict on children

- “Normal” negative outcomes from separation more likely (emotional, psychological and social problems, truancy, criminality)
- More likely to see their own conflicts with a parent as hostile
- Strongly related to boys’ anti-social behaviour
- Likelihood of harm to children’s self-esteem and self-confidence

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The effect of conflict on children

- Potential long-term impact on social behaviour (higher levels of aggression, problems with resolving disputes, acting out)
- Impact may extend to children’s relationships as adults, and relationships with own children
- Effects are similar in separated and in intact families, but are *worse* among children whose parents don’t separate

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Children’s reactions to conflict

- Children are sensitive to the competing demands on their loyalty, time, emotional energy
- May take on more adult responsibilities around the house
- May try to be the wounded parent’s emotional caregiver
- May shut down and withdraw from parents

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Children's reactions to conflict

- May tell each parent what the child believes:
 - will make the parent feel better
 - will reduce the level of conflict
 - is what the parent wants to hear
- May reject a parent to eliminate the conflict
- Remember that some kinds of behaviour are normal... like playing one parent against the other

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The effect of conflict on parenting

- Mothers may be less nurturing, display less warmth in interactions with child
- Mothers' discipline may become unpredictable
- Parents are angrier and easier to anger
- Fathers may withdraw from relationship with child, offer less discipline
- *Being absorbed in own problems lowers overall quality of parenting*

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Protecting children from conflict

How to help



Three facts about conflict

1. It is not always true that both sides in a highly conflicted situation are responsible for the conflict; sometimes just one person is responsible
2. Every step that protects children from conflict, no matter how small, helps
3. The efforts of just one parent to protect children from conflict can make a difference

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Protective factors reducing risk

- Good adjustment of parent with whom children mostly live
- Good parenting from *both* parents, use of cooperative parenting style, similar rules
- Consistent active involvement of father, especially if non-residential parent
- Limited number of transitions between homes
- *Reduced conflict between parents*

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Behaviours to avoid

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Do not...

- Ask the child to carry messages
- Encourage the child's negative remarks or criticisms about the other parent
- Ask questions that test loyalty or will put the child in a loyalty conflict
- Create a need for the child to conceal information or feelings

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Do not...

- Grill the child about activities and meals in the other parent's house
- Ask the child about the other parent's dating
- Discuss the separation or any court proceedings on Facebook, Instagram or Twitter
- Express anger or annoyance with the other parent to the child
- Badmouth the other parent to the child

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Do not...

- Talk about who is to blame for the separation
- Share details of what's going on in court or show court papers to the child
- Complain about the other parent's failure to pay support or obey court orders
- Use the child to spy on the other parent
- Undermine the other parent's authority

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Most of all, do not...

- Inappropriately ask the child for his or her opinions on issues like where the child wants to live or the child’s parenting schedule
- Recruit the child as an ally in your dispute with the other parent
- Encourage the child to keep secrets with you
- Rely on the child for emotional support

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Behaviours *not* to avoid

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Do...

- Continue to be actively engaged in parenting the child
- Listen and pay attention to the child’s feelings, especially about the separation, you and the other parent and your conflict
- Help the child to cope with the changes and disruption caused by the separation

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Do...

- Encourage the child’s relationship with the other parent; encourage the child to call, email, text or Skype the other parent
- Help the child to look forward to time with the other parent
- Keep photographs of the other parent in the child’s bedroom

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Try to...

- Maintain consistent rules between the child’s homes
- Encourage the child’s social relationships and extracurricular activities
- Use the same alternate caregivers
- Be extra patient with the child
- Be positive, optimistic and encouraging when talking about the other parent

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Disengage from the other parent

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Disengaging

- Love and hate are both strong emotions, your goal is to reach the absence of emotion:
 - accepting the fact that the relationship has ended
 - feeling indifferent toward the other parent
- Less extreme feelings and reactions
- Arguments are taken less personally and handled with less emotional investment

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Tools for disengaging

- Set and follow clear personal boundaries
- Negotiate and follow clear rules about parenting plans and communication
- Remember that you are predisposed to interpret the other parent's words and behaviour negatively
- Accept that there are things about the other parent you cannot change

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Tools for disengaging

- Avoid dwelling on the past
- Build new day-to-day routines and habits
- Avoid seeking emotional support or comfort from the other parent; *if you need support, get it from a counsellor*
- Avoid continuing a sexual relationship with the other parent

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Parenting plans

- Orders or agreements describing the arrangements for raising the child and the parents' relationship with each other as they raise the child
- Provide structure and rules, reduces the opportunity for conflict
- Should be comprehensive
- For people with a lot of conflict, should be clear and inflexible!

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Things to think about

- Medical, dental checkups and treatments
- Choice of school and activities
- Attendance at school, sports, family events
- Permissions and passports
- Restrictions on relocation
- Introduction of new partners
- Linguistic, cultural and religious education
- Religious and non-statutory holidays

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Helpful ground rules

- Don't ask the child to make decisions on important issues
- Don't use the child as a messenger
- Don't criticize the other parent to the child
- Respect the other parent's time with the child
- Follow the parenting plan
- Be polite to the other parent, and not just when the child is around

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Coping strategies

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Strategies that don't work

- Going to war on every dispute, no matter how small or unimportant; *pick your battles*
- Withdrawing and refusing to talk
- Trash-talking the other parent to anyone who will listen
- Making bogus or trivial complaints to the police, child welfare, the parent's employer, the parent's family, etc.

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Strategies that *do* work

- Focus on the problem not the other parent
- Be aware of your triggers
- Ignore small problems
- Don't reply to insults and attacks
- Model the sort of behaviour you want the other parent to use
- *Your goal is to decrease or defuse conflict, reduce negative emotional reactions*

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Improve how you communicate

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A few guidelines

- Be informative and as brief as possible
- Use the communication tool that's best for both you and the problem
- Be emotionally disengaged and neutral
- Be positive and avoid criticism and nit-picking
- Focus on the solution not the problem
- Avoid saying "always" and "never"

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Avoid YOU statements

- "You" statements about issues come across as nagging, criticizing or accusing
 - "You let her go to school in that?"
 - "You make me so mad!"
 - "How could you be so inconsiderate?"
- "You" statements blame the other parent but usually don't look toward a solution and they rarely encourage cooperation

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Use I statements

- “I” statements about a problem talk about your reactions and feelings rather than the other parent’s behaviour
 - “I was upset that I had to rush to get to school.”
 - “I feel embarrassed when we argue in public.”
 - “I would appreciate if you could remember to bring her school books home.”
- “I” statements focus on you not the other parent, are less blaming

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Even better, use WE statements

- “We” statements include *both* of you, they suggest that a problem is a shared problem and encourage a team approach
 - “What can we do about his bad math marks?”
 - “How will we cover the cost of her new bike?”
 - “We can work this out together.”
- “We” statements don’t blame or criticize, and can help recruit the other parent’s help with a problem

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Watch out for MY statements

- Never, ever describe the child as “my child” (or shared property as “my property”)
- “My” statements make the other parent feel like you are ignoring his or her role in the child’s life; try saying things like:
 - “the child”
 - “our child”
 - “Lucy”

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Active listening

- Active listening is a way of having a conversation in which you *really listen* to what the speaker is saying and *check that you have really understood* what the speaker is saying
- Active listening is great any time you have to have a difficult conversation with someone
- Active listening helps to reduce conflict about difficult or sensitive subjects

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Active listening tools

- Asking *closed questions*
- Asking *open questions*
- *Paraphrasing* and *summarizing* what the other person has said
- Using *WE statements* and *I statements*, and avoiding *YOU statements*

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Closed questions

- Closed questions are great for getting yes/no, one-word answers and for confirming a fact
 - "Do I have to go back to the dentist?"
 - "Can you drop him off half an hour early?"
 - "Do you still have a job?"
 - "Is your car blue?"
- They let you quickly check that you've understood what the speaker has said

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Open questions

- Open questions don't assume their answer and ask for a lot more details
 - "When are you leaving for work?"
 - "What should we get her for her birthday?"
 - "How did you escape from jail?"
- These generally:
 - seem like neutral requests for more information
 - give a lot more information than closed questions
 - come across as less demanding

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"Are you leaving work at 4:30?"

Yes / No

"When are you leaving work?"

Once I finish replacing the engine in the Chevy, probably about 5:00 or so if everything goes well.

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Paraphrasing

- Paraphrasing clarifies what the speaker has said and helps to confirm your understanding
 - "So what you're saying is that ..."
 - "In other words, ..."
 - "If I understand correctly, you're saying that ..."
- It helps the speaker feel that he or she has really been heard and that you've really made an effort to listen and understand
- *It doesn't mean you agree*

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"I just don't know what to do. I'm pulling my hair out trying to deal with how mad the children are that they have to go to a new school. I'm crying all the time; I'm a wreck! This is so frustrating!"

"It sounds like the kids are having a lot of challenges adapting and that you're having a really hard time helping them."

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Summarizing

- Summarizing lets you pick out the important bits of what the speaker has said and sort out a complicated discussion
 - "So you'll do ... and you'd like me to ..."
 - "Let me check that I've got everything right, you've said that ..."
- It tells the speaker that he or she has been heard and offers an opportunity to correct
- *It also doesn't mean you agree*

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"Look, there's one week left before school starts. The kids need a check up and I need to get the school supply list. Oh, and we need to check that their vaccinations are up to date. I've got to return Angela's bike and you need to find the receipt. I think Angela is going to need new soccer shoes. She needs new shin guards too. Do you remember when the kids last saw Dr. Chen?"

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“Look, there’s one week left before **school starts**. The kids need a **check up** and I need to get the school **supply list**. Oh, and we need to check that their **vaccinations** are up to date. I’ve got to return **Angela’s bike** and you need to find the **receipt**. I think Angela is going to need new **soccer shoes**. She needs new **shin guards** too. Do you remember when the kids last saw **Dr. Chen?**”

“Okay, so **we’ve** got a bunch of stuff to do to get the kids ready for school. If I’ve understood right, we need to take the kids back to Dr. Chen for a check up and to make sure that they’ve got their shots. We need to return Angela’s bike. We also need to get Angela outfitted for her team, and you’re going to take care of the kids’ school supplies. Is that right?”

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“Look, there’s one week left before school starts. The kids need a check up and I need to get the school supply list. Oh, and we need to check that their vaccinations are up to date. I’ve got to return Angela’s bike and you need to find the receipt. I think Angela is going to need new soccer shoes. She needs new shin guards too. Do you remember when the kids last saw Dr. Chen?”

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Active listening tips

- Be attentive, display sincere empathy
- Don’t interrupt or criticize, use calm voice
- Be curious, display sincere interest
- Don’t ask too many closed questions in a row
- Be careful of “why” open questions
- Don’t paraphrase all the time, throw in a bunch of open and closed questions and summarize from time to time

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Summary

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Protecting children from conflict

- Don't ask questions that test child's loyalty or put them in the middle of your problem
- Don't bad-mouth the other parent to the child
- Support the child's relationship with the other parent, demonstrate your support
- Keep your conflict away from the child's eyes and ears
- Reduce your conflict with the other parent

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Reducing conflict

- Don't broadcast your dispute through social media or discuss your dispute with the child
- Set clear personal boundaries
- Negotiate a clear parenting plan
- Work on your communication skills
- Disengage from your emotional relationship with the other parent

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Disengaging

- Let bygones be bygones, don't dwell on the past
- Handle as a business relationship, not an emotional relationship
- Focus on the problem, not the other parent, and ignore small problems
- Be aware of your triggers
- Consider counselling

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Setting personal boundaries

- How you prefer to communicate
- When you will reply to communications
- Identify communication that is inappropriate
 - language
 - time and frequency
 - presence of friends, family and children
- Identify consequences when your boundaries are not respected

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Creating parenting plans

- Clear and unambiguous
- Detailed and comprehensive
- Child-focused and address both parents' rights and responsibilities
- Further agreements and negotiations are not required
- Can be through court order or agreement

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Recommended reading

Resources



Resources

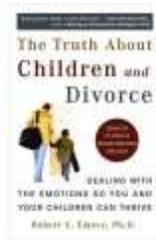
- For parents
 - *Tug of War*, Harvey Brownstone
 - *Helping Kids Cope with Divorce the Sandcastles Way*, Gary Neuman
 - *Befriending Your Ex After Divorce*, Judith Rabinor
 - *Joint Custody with a Jerk*, Julie Ross and Judy Corcoran
- For children
 - *The Bright Side: Surviving Your Parents' Divorce*, Max Sindell

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Resources

The Truth About Children and Divorce, Robert Emery



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