



Learning about family transitions  
from the child's perspective

*Coping with* **Separation & Divorce**  
A Parenting Seminar

# Parent Handbook

A collaborative program offered by  
University of Vermont Extension  
and Vermont Superior Court Family Division

Written by

Judy Branch, CFCS, Extension Associate Professor

Lawrence G. Shelton, Ph.D., Associate Professor, University of Vermont

Marcia Bedig, M.S., COPE Program Manager



---

# Children's rights and privileges

## The right to ...

---

- be treated as an interested and affected person, and not as a pawn or possession.
- love each parent, without feeling guilt, pressure, or rejection.
- love, care, guidance, and protection from both parents.
- be safe from parental violence.
- be free from pressure to choose sides or be asked to decide where they want to live.
- express their feelings about the divorce, such as anger, sadness, or fear.
- a positive and constructive on-going relationship with each parent.
- be free from pressure to make adult decisions.
- remain a child, without being asked to take on parental responsibilities, or be an adult companion or friend to parents.
- the most adequate level of economic support that can be provided by the best efforts of both parents.
- be kept out of the middle of parents' conflict, including not carrying messages, or hearing disparaging remarks about either parent.

## The privilege to ...

---

- learn from parents and model their behavior after their parents' positive examples.
  - learn courage, cooperation, and accountability.
  - make friends, and participate in school and community activities.
  - succeed in school and prepare themselves for independence.
-

---

## Welcome to The Coping with Separation and Divorce Parenting Seminar (COPE)

Since 1992, the COPE program has been providing parents with insights, information, practical tips and tools to make their job as parents easier, more rewarding and -- most importantly -- more influential on their children's successful adjustment to changes in their family life. The focus of the program is on increasing parents' understanding of the process from the child's point of view. There are many positive actions parents can take to increase their child's security and acceptance of the family changes. What are some of these actions? One is to **protect 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, such as keeping children in the same school or childcare.

This handbook expands on material that is presented in the seminar. It provides some information for parents dissolving abusive relationships, and for those who do not intend to share parenting with their child's other parent, as well as information for cooperating parents. Some of what is suggested in the handbook and seminar may not fit for you and your family. Each family is unique and COPE offers a brief introduction to parenting during and after separation and divorce. The resources section of the handbook provides

many ways to keep learning and accessing support through books, websites and Vermont organizations. COPE instructors are available during the class and at breaks to answer questions and provide resources and referral.

Consider showing this handbook to grandparents, childcare providers, and others who love and care for your children. Everyone would like to see children sail right through the changes, to feel no pain, and to adjust easily. Few sail through without some 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 the distress that determines the outcome; it's the way the stresses are handled that makes the difference. Imagine in the future, perhaps at your child's graduation or at the birth of a grandchild, reflecting back with your children on this time and hearing them thank you for handling the challenges well.

We welcome your comments and suggestions. Please send them to *Coping with Separation & Divorce*, UVM Extension, 278 South Main Street, Suite 2, St. Albans, VT 05478 or email to: [elaine.burnor@uvm.edu](mailto:elaine.burnor@uvm.edu).

For more information about the seminar and resources for parents and children: [www.uvm.edu/extension/cope](http://www.uvm.edu/extension/cope)

## Acknowledgments

Thanks to the following for contributing to this handbook:

- The Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence  
Amy Torchia, Chani Waterhouse
- COPE Instructors  
Judy Cyprian, Susan Fay, Kathy Mendes

Past contributors:

- Jeri Martinez, Penny Pillsbury, Ann Marie Roth, Sky Yardley
- Children's Art from: *Changing Families* by Fassler, D., Lash, M. and Ives, S.  
The Kids First Center in Maine
-



---

# Contents

---

<b>Part 1. Understanding the family changes from your child’s point of view</b> .....	1
Understanding emotions .....	1
Talking with your child about separation, divorce or a parent moving out. ....	3
Tips for talking with and listening to your children.....	5
Changes in parenting .....	7
What children need to hear .....	10
<b>Part 2. Communicating with your child and with your child’s other parent</b> .....	11
Helping children cope according to their age and stage of development .....	11
Communication between parents .....	21
What Hurts and What Helps Children.....	24
<b>Part 3. Restructuring your family</b> .....	25
The law and decisions about your family .....	25
Parental Rights and Responsibilities .....	26
Cooperative parenting .....	27
Shared parenting .....	27
Parent-child contact.....	28
Financial decisions.....	29
Domestic violence/Safety issues .....	31
Are you afraid of your partner?.....	32
New relationships.....	33
What would your kids say?.....	37
<b>Part 4. Resources for you</b> .....	38
Getting help .....	38
Websites for families in transition .....	42
Reading lists .....	43
<b>Part 5. Appendix: Children’s Activities</b> .....	48

---

---

# Part 1.

## Understanding the family changes from your child's point of view.

---

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. Parents and children may have a sense of relief, and hope for a better future, while simultaneously feeling overwhelmed by the many losses and changes ahead. A divorce or separation is often painful because it represents the loss, not just of the relationship, but also of shared dreams, routines, future security, social identity, and a familiar family unit. When faced with a significant loss people often experience a series of emotions that are referred to as the grief process.

The grief process, with its five stages of emotions, was first described by Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her 1969 book *On Death and Dying*. The five stages of grief have since been generalized as a natural response people have to significant losses in life.

The five stages of grief are **denial, anger, bargaining, sadness and eventually acceptance.**

If you or your children are experiencing any of these emotions it may help to know that grieving is a natural and healthy response to loss. Not everyone who grieves goes through all of these stages and you do not have to go through each stage in order to heal. Most people don't experience the stages in a neat, orderly fashion and the strength and duration of these feelings will vary from person to person.

One day you might feel numb, the next you might be sobbing, and then you might be furious for a week. After some time you might feel you have arrived at acceptance, only to have an unexpected grief spasm when you come across an old photo, or hear a certain song on the radio.

Though it may seem endless, the pain and confusion does lighten, generally over a period of eighteen months to three years. Often the parent who initiated the separation is further along in this process.

Recognizing what stage you, your child, and your child's other parent are in can be helpful, especially for understanding behaviors.

**What stage am I experiencing right now?**

**What stage is my child experiencing?**

**What stage is my child's other parent experiencing?**

Answer these questions again in six months to track progress.

When you're grieving it can be challenging to think clearly, or to make decisions at all, much less to make them well.

**Take your time; gather information and support before making important decisions.**

## GRIEF & LOSS: The Stages

STAGE	FEELINGS	CHILD'S BEHAVIOR	PARENT RESPONSE
<b>DENIAL</b>	Disbelief; Reality is too painful; If they don't believe then maybe it isn't really happening.	Believes whatever is going on is temporary; refuses to talk about the situation.	<i>"It may be hard to believe our family is changing. I'll always be here for you, that will never change."</i>
<b>ANGRY</b>	<p><u>Angry at:</u></p> <p>Having to experience pain</p> <p>Having no choice</p> <p>Changes that may occur</p> <p>Themselves by thinking they caused the situation</p>	<p>Says painful things to parents</p> <p><i>"This isn't fair" "I hate you"</i></p> <p>Wants to blame self or others</p> <p>Rejects authority</p> <p>Argues/ fights with kids/ siblings</p> <p>Tests limits (risk taking)</p>	<p>Show empathy by listening &amp; apologizing: <i>"It makes sense you feel angry and I'm sorry you have to go through this."</i></p> <p>Acknowledge anger &amp; ask child to tell you about his/her anger:</p> <p><i>"I'm very upset that _____"</i></p> <p>Encourage problem solving: <i>"What do you need? Let me hear your concerns and ideas."</i></p> <p>Keep your own anger in check</p>
<b>BARGAINING</b>	Desperation and anxiety with the wish to turn back the clock. Be prepared for anger or sadness when kids realize they can't change the situation.	<p><i>"If I promise to always do my chores will you two get back together?"</i></p> <p>Creative attempts to get parents together</p>	<p><i>"Nothing you did caused this and nothing you do can change it."</i></p> <p>Explain what will stay the same and what will change</p>
<b>SAD/ DEPRESSED</b>	<p>Feeling sad about the family situation is very normal.</p> <p>Get professional help for depression</p>	<p><u>Signs of Depression:</u></p> <p>*Withdrawal from family/ friends</p> <p>*Not caring about usual interests</p> <p>*Eating too much/ too little</p> <p>*Sleeping too much/ too little</p> <p>*Crying easily</p> <p>*Not caring about appearance</p> <p>*Irritable</p> <p>*Drop in grades</p> <p>*Difficulty concentrating</p> <p>*cutting</p> <p>*substance abuse</p>	<p><i>"It's ok to feel sad, this is a tough time."</i></p> <p><i>"Let's look at websites and books to see how others cope"</i></p> <p>Allow your own sadness without burdening child by using them to "listen"</p> <p><i>"When I'm sad it helps me to go for a walk, talk with a friend, take a bubble bath, play outside and remind myself that things will get better."</i></p> <p>Maintain family routines and start new ones</p>
<b>ACCEPTANCE</b>	Secure, happy, comfortable	Can talk about the past and is looking forward to the future.	<i>"You've done a good job getting used to all the changes. I like hearing about your activities, you seem happier."</i>



---

When you feel sad, it helps to have a hug.



*Talking with your child about separation, divorce or a parent moving out.*

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

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 their parents together to solve the child's problems. Some children stay in denial refusing to believe what the parents are saying. 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.**



---

**Stop**  
**Ask yourself:**  
*How will this information help my child?*

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.

### *Communication Tips*

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.

#### *Communication Tips for Parents*

- Notice when your kids are most likely to talk – for example, at bedtime, during mealtimes, in the car.
- **Start the conversation** – it lets kids know you care about what's happening in their lives. Use an open-ended approach, for example: What was the high point of your day? What was the low point? Sharing high and low points (or other open-ended questions) can become a routine conversation starter that builds family connection. Family routines and traditions provide comfort and security for kids.
- Kids love **one-on-one time with a parent**, make this a priority. Even short amounts of focused time can create special moments that fuel the parent-child relationship.
- *Name it to Tame it:* Help kids identify their feelings, to label them. The simple act of **naming your feelings** can help to calm the brain and foster resilience.

---

## Tips for Listening To and Talking With Your Children

Gary Neuman author of *Helping Your Kids Cope with Divorce: the Sandcastles Way* offers 4 steps to help children talk with their parents about the family changes:

1. **Choose an informal setting.** Disguise the talk by participating in a fun, distracting activity: having a meal together, folding the laundry, cooking together, driving in the car, tucking in at bedtime - these are great times to encourage sharing of feelings.
2. **Don't be a conversation killer.** This is the number one mistake that loving parents do. Parents want to rescue their children, tell them "everything is going to be okay" or tell them why they shouldn't feel bad - this shuts the child down by implying what they're feeling is wrong.
3. **Put yourself in their shoes (empathize).** If you really do that in your heart you will always say the right thing. You will say things like- "It sounds like you're feeling sad and kinda mad." When you acknowledge your children's feelings they'll say: "Wow, yeah I do feel that way" and they'll continue talking to you.
4. **Initiate the conversation.** Many parents say come to me if you want to talk, but it's the parent's job to make sure the talking happens. Too many parents avoid bringing up certain subjects because they're afraid they'll make their kids feel sad. If they're not sad or you get the feeling wrong, they'll correct you. You're not going to make them feel that way. So if they are not talking or if they've had a conversation and you need to talk about it again, just bring it up. You can say: "Listen, I know you must be feeling kind of sad" or "Kids in this situation often have sad/ mad feelings".

**Reflective Listening** is a communication skill that will help you to put these steps into action. Reflective listening is "reflecting back" the emotions and content of what the speaker is saying:

**What you're saying is.....**  
**You're trying to say that.....**  
**It seems that.....**  
**You feel.....**  
**You sound sad, angry, happy, excited.....**

### Examples of Reflective Listening:

Child: I can't believe mom didn't pick me up.

Reactive Parent: Oh, it's no big deal, you know how she is.

**Reflective Listening: I see you're disappointed that mom didn't pick you up.**

Child: Yesterday, I got all my homework done!

Reactive Parent: I wish you could be that focused at this house.

**Reflective Listening: You sound proud of your hard work.**

### Scenario: Parent using Reflective Listening

Child: This rule stinks!

Parent: You sound angry about this rule.

Child: Yeah what's the big deal, why are you so strict?

Parent: You think that I'm overly strict?

Child: You used to be a lot nicer.

Parent: It seems like I've changed?

Child: Before the divorce you didn't bug me so much

Parent: (rephrasing and not taking it personally) It sounds like you feel that I've been on your case a lot since we moved?

Child: (pauses, tearing up) I hate it. I hate it since the divorce.

Parent: I've been more moody and all these changes seem to make you sad and mad too.

Child starts to cry. Parent comforts child.

Parent: What can we do to make things better here?

Child: I need a place where I can keep all my school stuff.

Parent: Let's set that up and give it a try for a week. I'm glad you told me how you're feeling and that we talked about everything. How about we check-in about this again tomorrow night?

**Reflective Listening** can prevent many conflicts between parents and children and with your child's other parent too.

Co-parent: You never make the kids do their homework when they're with you.

Rather than reacting by defending yourself respond respectfully by validating the feeling and the concern. (It doesn't mean that you necessarily agree, but that you understand.)

Reflective Listening: I hear that you're worried that I won't make sure the kids do their homework.

Use **Reflective Listening** because:

- When people feel understood they're less defensive.
- When people feel heard they're more open to problem solving.

**Reflective Listening** sends a respectful message: "I get you, I hear you, I understand your situation and feelings." It takes practice to replace common reactions like questioning, analyzing, judging, and advice giving, with a reflective listening response.

Reflective listening isn't just for face-to-face communications. Practice this skill when writing emails, texting or with other written responses. Take a few deep breaths and compose yourself before composing responses when faced with difficult topics.

---

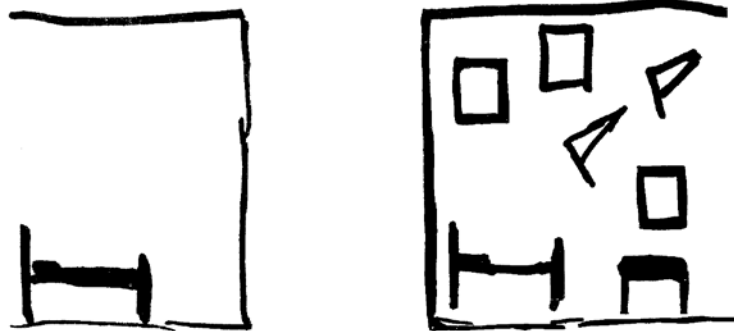
## Changes in parenting

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. **Seek out resources that help you to recharge your parenting battery:** other parents, extended family, professionals, books, websites, classes and support groups.

## One parent at a time

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

*It's hard having two different rooms.  
One doesn't really feel like home.*



---

## *An absent parent*

you are. When you are supposed to be spending time with your child, make that your top priority. If you're not going to be available to your child, be honest about that and take responsibility for it. Children tend to blame themselves if a parent disappears from their lives.

**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 they may come to distrust and resent you.**

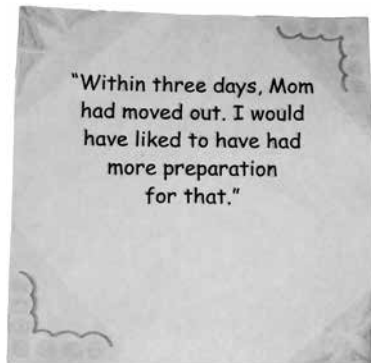
If you think your children's other parent is unreliable or has other problems, give your children the chance to discover those realities for themselves. Children need to be free to experience both parents in ways that are comfortable for them and that allow them to form their own images and draw their 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.

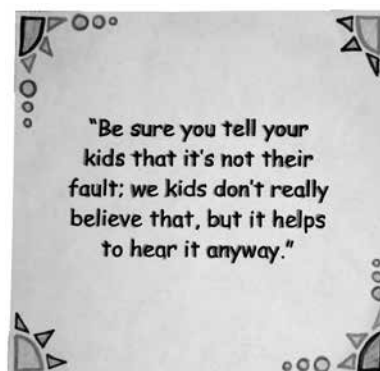
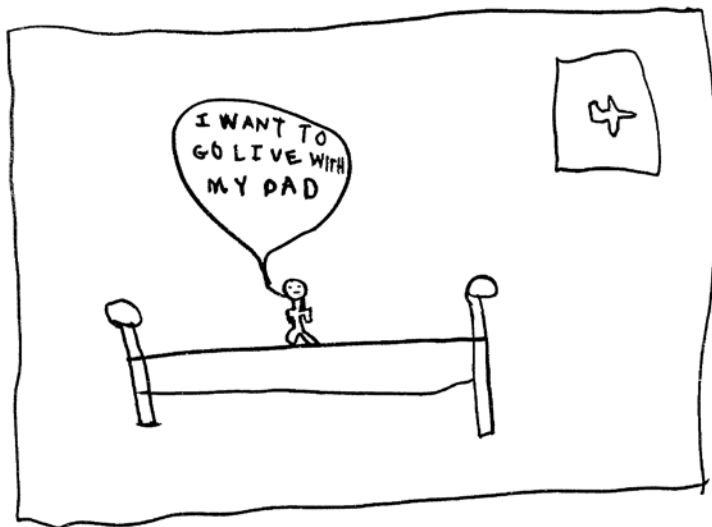
Children's reactions to all experiences in their lives depend on the skills they have developed, their histories, their individual temperaments, and their current situations. A child's reactions to parents restructuring their family may be similar to the reactions of other children the same age,

---

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 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.



"Within three days, Mom had moved out. I would have liked to have had more preparation for that."



"Be sure you tell your kids that it's not their fault; we kids don't really believe that, but it helps to hear it anyway."



## 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 the separation that is without blame. 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 traditions that will continue. Show the scheduled time with each parent by color coding a calendar.
- 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. Not acknowledging what is already known adds to unhealthy “secrecy”.
- Say that children will no longer have to witness upsetting fighting or hostile arguments. (If this is not the case, seek support for yourself and your children)



---

## Part 2.

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

---

### 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 their parents' decision
- 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

Many reactions are predictable if you know a child's age and stage of development. You can use your understanding of your children's needs and likely reactions to prevent some of their distress, and to help them cope with their concerns. When you do this well, your children will keep developing in healthy ways, your relationships will be strengthened, and **everyone 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 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 later.

---

## **Infants (birth to 18 months)**



## **Developmental Stages of Children**

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

- Understand nothing about adult relationships, but are keenly aware of 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.

### ***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.

---

## **Toddlers (18 months to 3 years)**

### ***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.

### ***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 be clear about expectations for acceptable behavior and maintain consequences for misbehavior.
- 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.
- Protect toddlers from parents' fighting and emotional outbursts.

---

## Preschool children (3 to 5 years)



### *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.
- 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.
- 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.

---

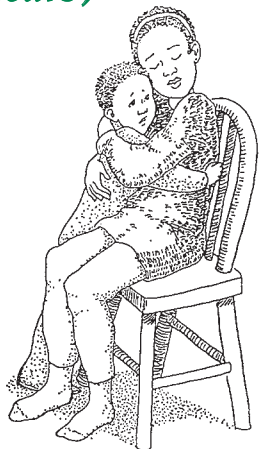
## ***Preschool (continued)***

### ***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 or use email.
- 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, some form of art, physical activity or dramatic play.
- 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.
- Let caregivers know what’s going on at home.
- Speak positively projecting a sense of hope and security.
- Use picture and story books about families to help child talk about feelings.

---

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



### 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.

---

### *Signs of stress*

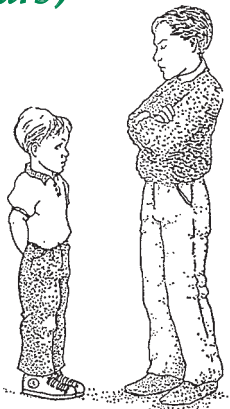
- Pervasive sadness, grief, withdrawal.
- Anger and increased aggressiveness.
- Trouble going to sleep, more physical illnesses.
- Fear going to school, not being picked up on time.
- Difficulty playing and having fun.

### *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.

---

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



### *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



---

## *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.
- When answering questions limit adult details.
- 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 routines and family traditions 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, email, etc.

- Avoid comments or behavior that would lead your child to choose sides.
- Protect your child from adult conflict.
- Foster children’s involvement with friends and group activities.
- 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).
- Plan as few changes as possible including waiting to introduce children to new relationships.
- 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.

## **Adolescents (12 to 18 years)**



### ***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.

- 
- 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 routines, 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.

---

## 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.

## *Should parents try to communicate with each other?*

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 if phone or face-to-face communication is difficult or impossible.

## *Parallel Parenting*

### **Parallel Parenting**

If there is a high level of conflict between parents, they may benefit from a style of co-parenting referred to as “parallel parenting” or parenting “next” to each other. Eventually these parents may move towards a more cooperative style of co-parenting. Until then, parallel parenting can help **parents disengage from each other while maintaining their involvement with their children.** Each parent follows the guidelines set out in a detailed parenting plan. Parents develop independent relationships with their children’s teachers, coaches, doctors, caregivers and friends so they don’t have to rely on the other parent. Parents’ communication about their children is in writing unless there is an emergency. The written communication is limited to facts about children’s health, dates of activities, or other specific and necessary daily details.

---

## Parent-with-parent communication tips

## Business-like communication between parents

### Communicating in writing

- Options include email, texting, notes in a binder and websites for tools to organize written communication, such as: [sharekids.com](http://sharekids.com), [twohappyhomes.com](http://twohappyhomes.com), [myfamilywizard.com](http://myfamilywizard.com), google calendar, etc.
- 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

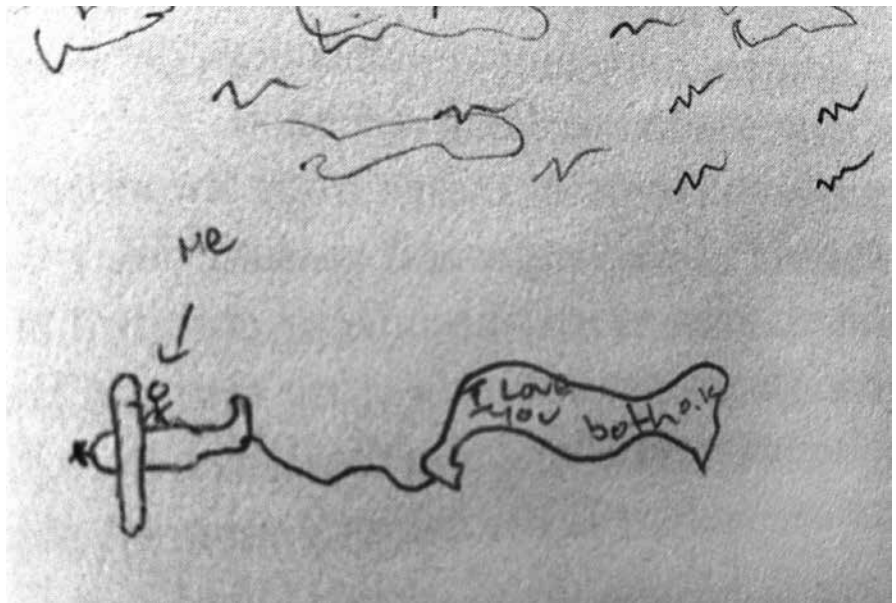
- When you call the other parent, always ask if it is a good time to talk about the children, and if not, ask when may be a better time.
- Use a business-like and respectful tone when speaking to your child’s other parent.
- Keep all communication focused on the children.
- If communication is sometimes difficult with the other parent, make sure the phone 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 end the call.

### 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 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 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.



Child's picture from Gary Neuman's book: *Helping Your Kids Cope with Divorce the Sandcastles Way.*



---

## What Hurts What Helps:

### CHILDREN ARE HURT BY:

- Displays of rage or hostility between parents. Angry conflict at pick up and drop off is particularly harmful.
- Hearing one parent criticize or bad-mouth the other (including eye rolling, sarcastic tone.)
- Inconsistent contact or no contact with a parent. \*
- Carrying messages and/or payments.
- One parent moving more than a days drive away.
- Chaotic changes, surprise separations and disturbing departures.
- Interference with the other parent's time and authority.
- Adult information "who did what to whom" "who wanted the separation/divorce".
- Parents who are not emotionally available, because they're distracted by their distress, new partners, friends, social media & the phone.
- Being around people who perpetuate conflict and "take sides".

*\* Parents' and children's safety may be a factor.*

### CHILDREN ARE HELPED BY:

- ✓ Living in homes that are free from angry parental conflict.
- ✓ A predictable & detailed parent-child contact schedule that allows for some flexibility.
- ✓ Conflict free & on-time pick-up and drop off experiences.
- ✓ Having both parents involved in their day to day activities. \*
- ✓ Scheduled business-like parental communications when the children are not present. \*
- ✓ Easy access to each parent (phone, email, Skype). \*
- ✓ Parents healing and taking care of themselves.
- ✓ Parents who know that discipline is: teaching, guiding, nurturing and loving.
- ✓ Parents maintaining & creating family routines and traditions.
- ✓ Parents balancing creating their own new life and focusing on their child's one & only childhood.
- ✓ Waiting one year after separation, before introducing children to a new relationship.
- ✓ A support system of siblings, extended family, teammates, and friends. Support from teachers, school counselors, therapists, and faith-based organizations can also be helpful.



---

## Part 3.

# Restructuring your family

---

### 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 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. 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.
- **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

## 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.*

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 and 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. 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.**

---

## Cooperative parenting

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 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

### *Abusive parents and parent-child contact*

### *Child support and parent-child contact*

### *Relocation issues*

*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.**

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. 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.

**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.

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

---

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

## **Financial decisions**

*Child support*

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.

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.

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.

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 parents 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



---

## *Property debt*

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.

## *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.

## 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.*

**Domestic violence is a pattern of coercive behavior used by an individual to gain and maintain power and control over an intimate partner or ex-partner.** Tactics may include physical, sexual, emotional and economic abuse. There is a 30-60% overlap of child abuse and domestic violence, if one of these issues exists in a family the other may exist as well.

Victims of domestic violence, and those who abuse them, come from all walks of life, all races, all cultural groups, all socio-economic backgrounds, all educational levels, all religions, and all occupations. Abusers can be in same-sex relationships as well as opposite sex relationships.

Abuse impacts every aspect of a relationship and of a victim's life including mental and physical health, friend and family relationships, parenting and financial status. Abuse is a learned behavior and a choice, rooted in the abuser's belief



---

*Are you afraid of your partner or former partner?*

system. Abusers frequently see their behavior as justified and/or harmless. **Abusers often continue to be abusive or escalate their tactics after a victim attempts to end the relationship.**

The Vermont Network Against Domestic & Sexual Violence compiled a list of warning signs:

You may be in an abusive relationship if your partner:

- Puts you down, calls you names, or criticizes you.
- Acts jealous or possessive.
- Tries to control or limit your contact with friends and family
- Takes control of your finances, makes you ask for money, or refuses to give you money.
- Undermines your parenting
- Refuses to allow you to use the family car or help you with transportation.
- Follows you, listens in on phone calls, or reads your email or texts.
- Threatens you with harm or acts in ways that frighten you or make you uncomfortable.
- Threatens to report you to the police, family services, INS, or other legal authorities.
- Displays or threatens you with weapons to make you afraid.
- Expects you to ask permission to do anything.
- Makes all the decisions for the household and does not respect your opinions.
- Does not want you to work or attend school.
- Punishes you by withholding affection.
- Shoves, slaps, strangles, or hits you.
- Forces you to have sex when you don't want to or makes you perform sexual acts you don't want to do.
- Throws things, destroys your property, or threatens to harm your children or pets.
- Denies abusing you, acts like what he or she did is not a big deal, or blames you for the abuse.
- Forces you to try to drop charges after a violent incident.
- Uses suicide threats as a method to control you.
- Uses parenting and child related issues as vehicles to control you.

---

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

Domestic violence affects every member of the family. Many children experience emotional, behavioral, physical, social and cognitive impacts from exposure to abusers. How children are impacted by domestic violence depends on what the child sees and hears, the frequency and severity of the abuse, their gender, birth order, age and developmental stage. **Children are least impacted when they have a strong relationship with their parent who is non abusive and a supportive extended family and community.**

If you think you may be a victim of domestic violence reach out and get help for yourself and your children. Call the Helpline at 1-800-228-7395. **What can you expect when you call?** First, and most importantly, you'll talk to a caring person (advocate) who will listen carefully without judging you or your situation. Advocates understand abusive situations. **They can connect you to local resources,** and help you think about options so you can determine what will work best for you and your children.

**Statewide Helpline: 1-800-ABUSE95 (1-800-228-7395)** a free 24/7 hotline for crisis support, ongoing peer support and advocacy, connection to your local program and resources.

**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. Consider not including dates during your time with your child until it's 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.

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

## Stepfamilies

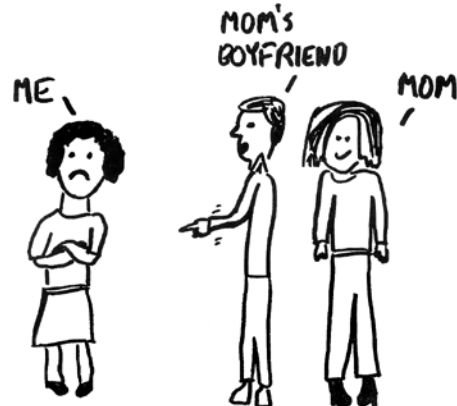
and the new step-parent just because the adults love each other. They may also expect that each partner will easily love the other's children. Members of stepfamilies can be greatly disappointed, confused, and unhappy when expectations can't be quickly realized and new rules cause major conflicts.

Parents wishing to create a stepfamily 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 challenges they will face.

**Step-parents can take the role of respected significant friend and mentor instead of disciplinarian for their step-children.** Children will adjust more quickly to new partners 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.

Children should not be expected to love a new step-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 step-parent 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.

I DON'T LIKE IT WHEN MY MOM'S BOYFRIEND TELLS ME WHAT TO DO! HE'S NOT MY REAL DAD, AND I DON'T SEE WHY I HAVE TO LISTEN TO HIM.



---

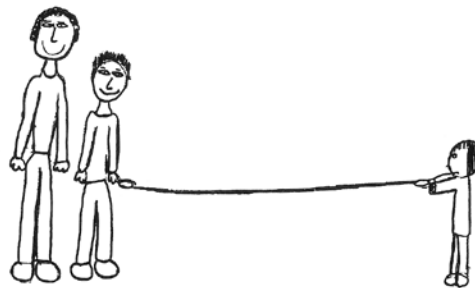
## Extended family and friends

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.

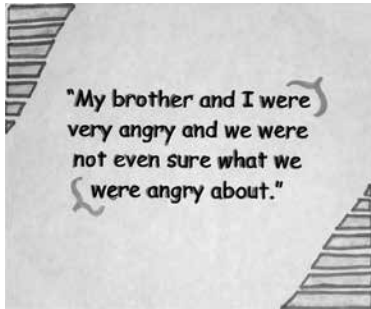
Separating and divorcing couples may drift away from mutual family friends because the friends become uncomfortable about taking sides. Newly single parents are likely to make new friends as they develop interests no longer compatible with their couple friends. It may be necessary to plan how children 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.

*Sometimes I feel like pulling my mother  
away from her new boyfriend.*

*I don't like having to share my mom.*



## School and community support



Voices of children from the Kids First Center in Maine.

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

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.

Express your feelings  
With your parents and step  
parents!



## What would your kids say?

### Room for improvement if kids would say:

#### ✓ Check all that apply

- My parents say mean things about each other.
- At pick up and drop off my parents fight or do the silent treatment.
- Child support is scary
- My parents blame each other for everything. Am I a screw-up too?
- Will my parents both go to my graduation (or game or other event)? They can't even be in the same room!
- My parents never talk or email each other; I can get away with things.
- Who is picking me up today?
- I don't get to see my parent who moved far away.
- My parent is either on the phone or computer or hardly ever home.
- I'm the "man" or "mother" of the house now.
- My parents try to squeeze stuff out of me about what's going on at the other's house.
- I go between my parents with messages & money.
- I hardly ever get to spend alone time with my parent now, they are always hanging out with their new "friend."

### Parents are on the high road if kids would say:

#### ✓ Check all that apply

- My parents work together to parent me.
- My parents and I look at pictures and movies from the past, it's fun.
- Even though my parents don't get along great, they sometimes say nice things about each other.
- At bedtime or in the car I talk to my parents about lots of stuff
- I still get to have movie night and we started a new tradition: Friday night pizza!
- My parents and I email, text and talk on the phone when we aren't together
- Both my parents know my friends, my homework and even my favorite music.
- We have lots of family meals even if it felt strange, at first, with just one parent.
- The fighting has stopped.
- I'll meet my parent's date if it's looking "serious."
- If my parent remarries that person will never replace my other parent in my heart.
- My teachers and coaches have both my parents' email and phone numbers.

✓ Safety concerns may impact parents' responses



---

## Part 4.

# Resources for you

---

### Getting help

---

#### *Programs/services to which the 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 court for approval and to be ordered by a judge.

**Agreements made in mediation are usually more workable—thus less likely to return to 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 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 court or call: (802) 828-6551.

#### 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 Court Mediation Program at (802) 828-6551

#### 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 reestablish 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.

For statewide information go to [www.safevisitsvt.org](http://www.safevisitsvt.org)

### 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 children, as it focuses on the impact of not just each parent but other household members on the children’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 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.

### 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)

- 
- Legal Aid, Inc., VT: 1-800-889-2047, [www.vtlawhelp.org](http://www.vtlawhelp.org)

### Choosing an attorney

- Look for an attorney with experience in family matters.
- Go to a court (Family division) 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.

### Collaborative law (*collaborative practice*)

Collaborative practice is a dispute resolution process in which parties settle without resort to litigation. Each parent's lawyer is committed to negotiating a mutually acceptable resolution without having the court decide the issues. Mental health and financial professionals may be utilized to ensure that all areas of negotiation are considered.

### Representing yourself

In Vermont, you are not required to have an attorney represent you in 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 Family Law. The purpose of this course is to educate litigants about the following: their responsibilities while representing themselves, courtroom etiquette, general court procedures.

Anyone may attend these courses, and the program is free.

*"When angry count ten,  
before you speak;  
if very angry, a hundred."*

*Thomas Jefferson*

---

## 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 children, 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

- The internet and the yellow pages provide contact information for counselors, psychologists, social workers and psychiatrists.
- Ask for provider names from your primary care health professional, your child's school counselor, your religious affiliation, 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.
- 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 with appropriate training and experience, who is licensed to practice in Vermont.

## Vermont Resources

Vermont Network Against Domestic & Sexual Violence

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

- If you're in immediate danger call 911

Domestic Violence Helpline: 1-800-228-7395  
Sexual Abuse Helpline: 1-800-489-7273

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



---

Have Justice Will Travel:  
Provides legal services and support for  
abused women and their children  
1-877-496-8100 [www.havejusticewilltravel.org](http://www.havejusticewilltravel.org)

Vermont Legal Aid (VLA)  
1-800-889-2047  
[www.vtlawhelp.org](http://www.vtlawhelp.org)

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

Collaborative Law  
[www.collaborativepractice.com](http://www.collaborativepractice.com)

Mediation  
[www.mediate.com](http://www.mediate.com)

Vermont Commission on Women  
[www.women.vermont.gov/resources](http://www.women.vermont.gov/resources)

Vermont Court Mediation Program:  
802-828-6551

Health and Human Services  
Information and Referral:  
Call: 2-1-1  
[www.vermont211.org](http://www.vermont211.org)

Vermont Prevent Child Abuse:  
Parents' Stress Line  
1-800-CHILDREN (1-800-244-5373)

Supervised Visitation:  
[www.safevisitsvt.org](http://www.safevisitsvt.org)

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

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

---

## Websites for families in transition

---

[www.uvm.edu/extension/cope](http://www.uvm.edu/extension/cope)

The COPE program's website has registration information, links to websites for parents and children, the Parent Handbook and a PDF of the Appendix to make copies of the children's activity pages.

[www.VermontJudiciary.org](http://www.VermontJudiciary.org)  
The Vermont Judiciary Website

[www.sharekids.com](http://www.sharekids.com), [www.twohappyhomes.com](http://www.twohappyhomes.com), [www.myfamilywizard.com](http://www.myfamilywizard.com) (has domestic violence tools) online family management tools: share calendars, photos, document storage and accounting.

[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; *proudtoparent* is for parents never married to each other.

[www.travel.state.gov](http://www.travel.state.gov)  
Children's Passport Alert Program  
Tools to prevent child abduction  
1-888-407-4747

## Parenting

[www.parenting247.org](http://www.parenting247.org)

The University of Illinois Extension program hosts this website, offering parenting information about children, birth through adolescence. Provides links to the best parenting resources on the Web.

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

The KidsHealth team of top-notch editors and medical reviewers stock this site with information for parents. There is a separate activities section for children and teens.

---

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

The Stepfamily Association of America website provides answers to FAQ's about stepfamily life and offers a free online, video based, parenting class.

Additional websites can be found by topic in the Reading List section of this Handbook.

***“Problems can not be solved by the same level of thinking that created them”***  
***Albert Einstein***

## **Reading lists**

---

### **General Parenting**

Dinkmeyer, D., et. al. *The Parent's Handbook: Systematic Training for Effective Parenting (STEP)*. American Guidance Service, 1997. (young children and teen versions available)

Faber, A and Mazlish, E. *How to Be the Parent You Always Wanted to Be*. Scribner, 2013.

Gottman, J., et al. *Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child: The Heart of Parenting*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997.

Kurcinka, M. *Raising your Spirited Child*, William Morrow, 2006.

Markham, L. *Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids*. Penguin, 2012.

Nelson, J. *Positive Discipline*. Ballantine Books, 1996.

Riera, M. *Staying Connected to Your Teenager*. Da Capo Press, 2003.

Siegel, D. *No Drama Discipline*. Bantam, 2014.

### **Divorced/Separated Parents**

Ahrons, C. *The Good Divorce*. New York: Harper Collins, 1994.

Beyer, R. *Speaking of Divorce: How to Talk to Your Kids and Help Them Cope*. Free Spirit, 2001.

Emery, R. *The Truth About Children and Divorce: Dealing with the Emotions So You and Your Children Can Survive*. Penguin Group, 2004. [www.emeryondivorce.com](http://www.emeryondivorce.com)

Garrity, C. and Baris, M. *Caught in the Middle: Protecting the Children of High Conflict Divorce*. Jossey-Bass, 1997.

Hannibal, M.E. *Good Parenting Through Your Divorce*. New York: Marlowe & Company, 2002.

Lansky, V. *Vicki Lansky's Divorce Book for Parents*. [3rd revised edition]. Minnetonka, MN: Book Peddlers. 1996.

Long, Nicholas. *Making Divorce Easier on Your Child: 50 Effective Ways to Help Children Adjust*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002.

Lowrance, M. *The Good Karma Divorce: Avoid Litigation, Turn Positive Emotions into Negative Emotions, and Get on With the Rest of Your Life*. HarperOne, 2010.

Neuman, M.G. *Helping Your Kids Cope with Divorce the Sandcastles Way*. New York: Random House, 1998.

Philyaw, D., Thomas, M. *Co-parenting 101*. New Harbinger, 2013.

Ricci, I. *Mom's House, Dad's House: A Complete Guide for Parents Who Are Separated or Divorced*. Revised Edition. New York: Fireside, 1997.



---

Schneider, M. and Zuckerman, J. *Difficult Questions Kids Ask (and are too Afraid to Ask) About Divorce*. Fireside, 1996.

Sember, Brette. *Unmarried with Children*. Adams Media, 2008.

Shulman, D. *Co-parenting after Divorce: How to Raise Happy, Healthy Children in Two Home Families*. Winnspeed Press, 1997.

Stahl, P. *Parenting After Divorce: Resolving Conflict and Meeting Your Children's Needs*. Atascadero, CA: Impact Publishers, 2007.

Thayer, E. and Zimmerman, J. *The Co-parenting Survival Guide: Letting Go of Conflict After a Difficult Divorce*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications Inc., 2001

Thomas, S. *Parents are Forever: A Step by- Step Guide to Becoming Successful Coparents After Divorce*. Springboard Publications, 2004. (Ideas for parents who never married)

Wallerstein, J. and Blakeslee, S. *What about the Kids?: Raising Your Children Before, During and After Divorce*. NY: Hyperion Books, 2003.

Wolf, A.E. *Why Did You Have To Get a Divorce? And When Can I Get a Hamster?: A Guide to Parenting Through Divorce*. NY: Noonday Press, 1998.

## **Parenting**

### **Moms**

Chisholm, D. *Single Moms Raising Sons: Preparing Boys to be Men When There's No Man Around*. Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2006.

Ellison, S. *The Courage to be a Single Mother: Becoming Whole After Divorce*. HarperOne, 2001.

Engber, A and Klungness, L. *The Complete Single Mother: Reassuring Answers to Your Most Challenging Concerns*. Adams Media Corporation, 2006.

Mack, C. *The Single Mom's Little Book of Wisdom to Help You Survive, Succeed, and Stay Strong*. iUniverse, Inc., 2006.

### **Dads**

Knox, D. *Divorced Dad's Survival Book: How to Stay Connected with Your Kids*. Reading, MA: Perseus, 2000.

Mandelstein, P. *Always Dad: Being a Great Father During and After Divorce*. Berkley, CA: Nolo Publishing, 2006.

Shimberg, E. and Shimberg, M. *The Complete Single Father: Reassuring Answers to Your Most Challenging Situations*. Cincinnati: Adams Media Corporation, 2007.

### **Gay and Lesbian Parents**

Peters, Julie Anne. *Between Mom and Jo*. Little Brown Books, 2008. (young adult readers)

Sember, B. *The Complete Gay Divorce*. Franklin Lakes, NJ: Career Press, 2006.

Snow, J. *How it feels to Have a Gay or Lesbian Parent: A Book by Kids for Kids of All Ages*. Haworth Press, 2004.

### **Practical Information on the Divorce Process**

Doskow, E. *Nolo's Essential Guide to Divorce*. Berkley, CA: Nolo Publishing, 2006.

Hadden, N and Broadfoot, C. *Divorce in Vermont*. St. Albans, VT: Acorn House, 2006.

---

Moskovitch, D. *The Smart Divorce: Proven Strategies and Valuable Advice from 100 Top Divorce Lawyers, Financial Advisors, Counselors, and other Experts*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2007.

Sember, B. *The Divorce Organizer and Planner*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004.

Stoner, K. *Divorce Without Court: A Guide to Mediation & Collaborative Divorce*. Nolo Publishing, 2009.

### Parenting Plans

Engel, M. *The Divorce Decisions Workbook: A Planning and Action Guide for the Practical Side of Divorce*. McGraw-Hill, 1992.

Major, J. *Creating A Successful Parenting Plan*. Breakthrough Parenting Inc., 2002.

Robert Emery, Ph.D the author of *The Truth About Children and Divorce*, provides guidance on preparing parenting plans and tips for parenting apart.  
[www.emeryondivorce.com](http://www.emeryondivorce.com)

### Domestic Violence

Bancroft, L. *Why Does He Do That? Inside the Minds of Angry and Controlling Men*. Penguin Group, 2002.

Bancroft, L. *When Dad Hurts Mom: Helping Your Children Heal the Wounds of Witnessing Abuse*. Putnam, 2004.

Bancroft, L., Silverman, J & Ritchie, D. *The Batterer As Parent: Addressing the Impact of Domestic Violence on Family Dynamics*. SAGE, 2011

Groves, B. *Children Who See Too Much*. Beacon Press, 2003.

NiCarthy, G. *Getting Free: You Can End Abuse and Take Back Your Life*. Seal Press, 2004.

### For Children

Bernstein, S. *A Family That Fights*. Albert Whitman & Company, 1991.  
(For children ages 5-9)

Coman, C. *What Jamie Saw*. Front Street, 1995  
Award winning novel on domestic abuse and child abuse, written from the point of view of an 8-year old boy.

Holmes, M., *A Terrible Thing Happened*. Magination Press, 2000  
(For children ages 3-8)

Lee, I., and K. Sylwester, *When Mommy Got Hurt*. Storymine, 2011.  
(For children ages 2-7)

- Website for Teens:

Bursting the Bubble –  
[www.burstingthebubble.com](http://www.burstingthebubble.com)

A website for teens and preteens about domestic violence, child abuse, and sexual abuse. It has children's stories, definitions, facts, and a section on 'What I Can Do'.

### Healing and Moving On

Anderson, K. and MacSkimming, R. *On Your Own: the Down-to-Earth Guide to Getting Through a Divorce or Separation and Getting on With Your Life*. McClelland & Stewart, 2007.

Coates, C. and LaCrosse, R. *Learning from Divorce: How to Take Responsibility, Stop the Blame, and Move On*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003.

Ellison, S. *The Courage to Love Again: Creating Happy, Healthy Relationships After Divorce*. San Francisco: HarperOne, 2002

---

Gray, J. *Mars and Venus Starting Over: A Practical Guide for Finding Love Again After a Painful Breakup, Divorce, or the Loss of a Loved One.* New York: Harper Paperbacks, 1998.

## Grandparents

Carson, L. *Essential Grandparent's Guide to Divorce: Making a Difference in the Family.* Health Communications, 1999.

Temlock, M. *Your Child's Divorce: What to Expect...What You Can Do.* Impact Publishers, 2006.

## Stepfamilies

Einstein, E. and Albert, L. *Strengthening Your Stepfamily.* Alascadero, CA: Impact Publishers, 2006.

Papernow, Patricia. *Surviving and Thriving in Stepfamily Relationships.* Routledge, 2013.

Thomas, S. *Two Happy Homes: A Working Guide for Parents & Stepparents After Divorce and Remarriage.* Springboard Publications, 2005.

## **Children's Books and Media Resources**

### Early Childhood

Brown, L. and Brown, M. *Dinosaurs Divorce: A Guide for Changing Families.* Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986.

Hiegaard, Marge. *When a Parent Marries Again.* Minneapolis: Woodland Press, 1993. (Book to draw in.)

Lansky, V. *It's Not Your Fault, Koko Bear.* Minnetonka, MN: Book Peddlers, 1998.

Levins, S. *Was It the Chocolate Pudding? A Story for Little Kids about Divorce.* American Psychological Association, 2005.

Lindsay, Jeanne W. *Do I Have a Daddy?* Buena Park, CA: Morning Glory Press, 1991. (Section for never married parents.)

Masurel, C. and Denton, K. *Two Homes.* Candlewick, 2003.

Ransom, J. and Finney, K. *I Don't Want to Talk About it: A Story About Divorce for Young Children.* Magination Press, 2000.

Spelman, C. and Parkinson, K. *Mamma and Daddy Bear's Divorce.* Albert Whitman & Company, 2001.

### Elementary School

Coffelt, T. *Fred Stays With Me!* Little Brown Books for Young Readers, 2007.

Hiegaard, M. *When Mom and Dad Separate.* Minneapolis: Woodland Press, 1991. (A book to draw in.)

Lash, M., et al. *Changing Families: A Guide for Kids and Grown-ups.* Burlington, VT: Waterfront Books, 1989. (A book to draw in, ages 3-9.)

Nightingale, L. *My Parents Still Love Me Even Though They're Getting Divorced: An Interactive Tale For Children.* Nightingale Rose Publications, 1996.

Ricci, I. *Mom's House, Dad's House for Kids: Feeling at Home in One Home or Two.* Fireside, 2006. (Read with ages 8-10.)

Rogers, F. *Let's Talk About Divorce.* New York: Penguin Putnam, 1996.

---

Thomas, S. *Divorced But Still My Parents*. Springboard Publications, 1997.

Winchester, K. and Beyer, R. *What in the World do You do When Your Parents Divorce?* Free Spirit Publishing Inc., 2001.

### Middle School

Blackstone-Ford, J., et al. *My Parents Are Divorced, Too: A Book For Kids by Kids*. Magination Press, 2006.

Blume, J. *It's Not the End of the World*. Delacorte Books for Young Readers, 2002.

Pickhardt, C. *The Case of the Scary Divorce (Jackson Skye Mystery)*. Magination Press, 1998.

Stern, E.S., et al. *Divorce is not the end of the World: Zoe and Evan's Coping Guide for Kids*. Tricycle Press, 2008.

Viogt, C. *A Solitary Blue*. Atheneum, 1993.

### High School

Block, J. *Stepliving for Teens: Getting Along with Stepparents, Parents, and Siblings*. Prince Stern Sloan, 2001.

MacGregor, C. *The Divorce Helpbook for Teens*. Impact Publishers, 2004.

Schab, L. *The Divorce Workbook for Teens*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Books, 2008.

### Adult Children

Foster, L. Brooke. *The Way They Were: Dealing With Your Parents Divorce After a Lifetime of Marriage*. Three Rivers Press, 2006

Kenyon, Nancy Ellen. *Coping With Your Parents Divorce When You're No Longer a Child!* Publish America, 2009.

### Websites for Children

<http://kidshealth.org/>

Interactive site for kids and teenagers

[www.pbskids.org/itsmylife/family/divorce](http://www.pbskids.org/itsmylife/family/divorce)

PBS Kids hosts this interactive website for children and teens. The activities encourage emotional health and well-being.

### DVDs for Children

Lemons 2 Lemonade (2005)

Features a diverse cast of kids and adults with an upbeat, engaging message (view with children ages 4-10).

Trevor Romain: Taking the 'Duh' out of Divorce (2008) Trevor Romain writes and directs short movies on sensitive topics for children. This story follows a young girl through the initial phase of shock that her parents are getting divorced to coping and looking forward to life after the divorce (view with children ages 5-10).

*“The secret of change is to focus all your energy not on fighting the old, but on building the new”  
Socrates*



---

## Part 5.

# Appendix: Children's Activities

---

Once you've told your children about the family changes, expect to have many more conversations, both planned and unplanned, over the coming weeks, months, and even years. This appendix provides a compilation of ideas and activities to foster positive communication between parents and children. Build your children's resilience by providing outlets for their emotions and opportunities for conversation and connection.

**1. Physical Activity:** Any activity that gets children up and moving will help them to release the pent up energy that accompanies strong feelings. Jump rope, play tag, dance to music, take a walk, shoot baskets or slow it down and practice deep breathing for a quieter physical outlet.



**2. Shed Tears:** crying is an important release for frustration, anger and sadness. Tell your children, girls and boys alike, that crying can help them to feel better. Have a box of tissues ready and honor their tears and yours as well.

If you're feeling sad  
it's ok to cry.



**3. Drawing and Writing:** Children enjoy journaling in a notebook, diary or on the computer. Younger children can dictate their thoughts especially as an accompaniment to their drawings. Keep a basket of markers, crayons, colored pencils and lots of paper readily available.

**4. Reflective Listening:** Reflective listening is an essential skill of effective parenting. When children feel listened to and understood they are more receptive to parental guidance. The book: *How To Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk* teaches active listening. Guidance counselors and teachers can direct parents to other books, websites, and parenting classes.

**5. Use Media:** Books, television shows, songs, and movies often provide opportunities for conversation starters with your children.

**6. Plan It:** Be proactive and have family meetings or a regular "check in" time with your children. The latest research shows that it's beneficial for children to sit down to a meal five times a week with at least one adult. Children also enjoy routines and family traditions (e.g. bedtime stories, movie night, Saturday game time, pizza night).

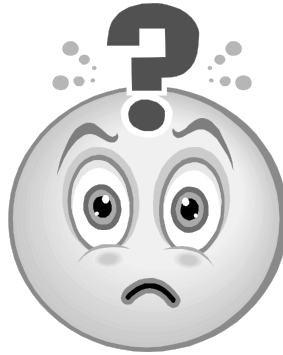
Family tradition ideas: \_\_\_\_\_

**7. Laughter:** Keep a sense of humor. Take time to play and goof around, this type of activity engages children and helps to diffuse some of the overwhelming feelings. It's great for the adults too!

People have a lot of different feelings:



Sad



Confused



Happy



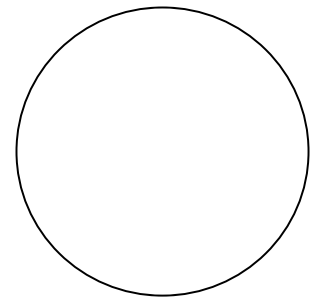
Excited



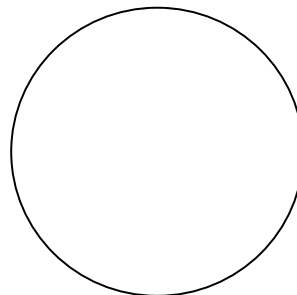
Angry

How are you feeling right now? Can you look at each face and think about a time when you felt that way?

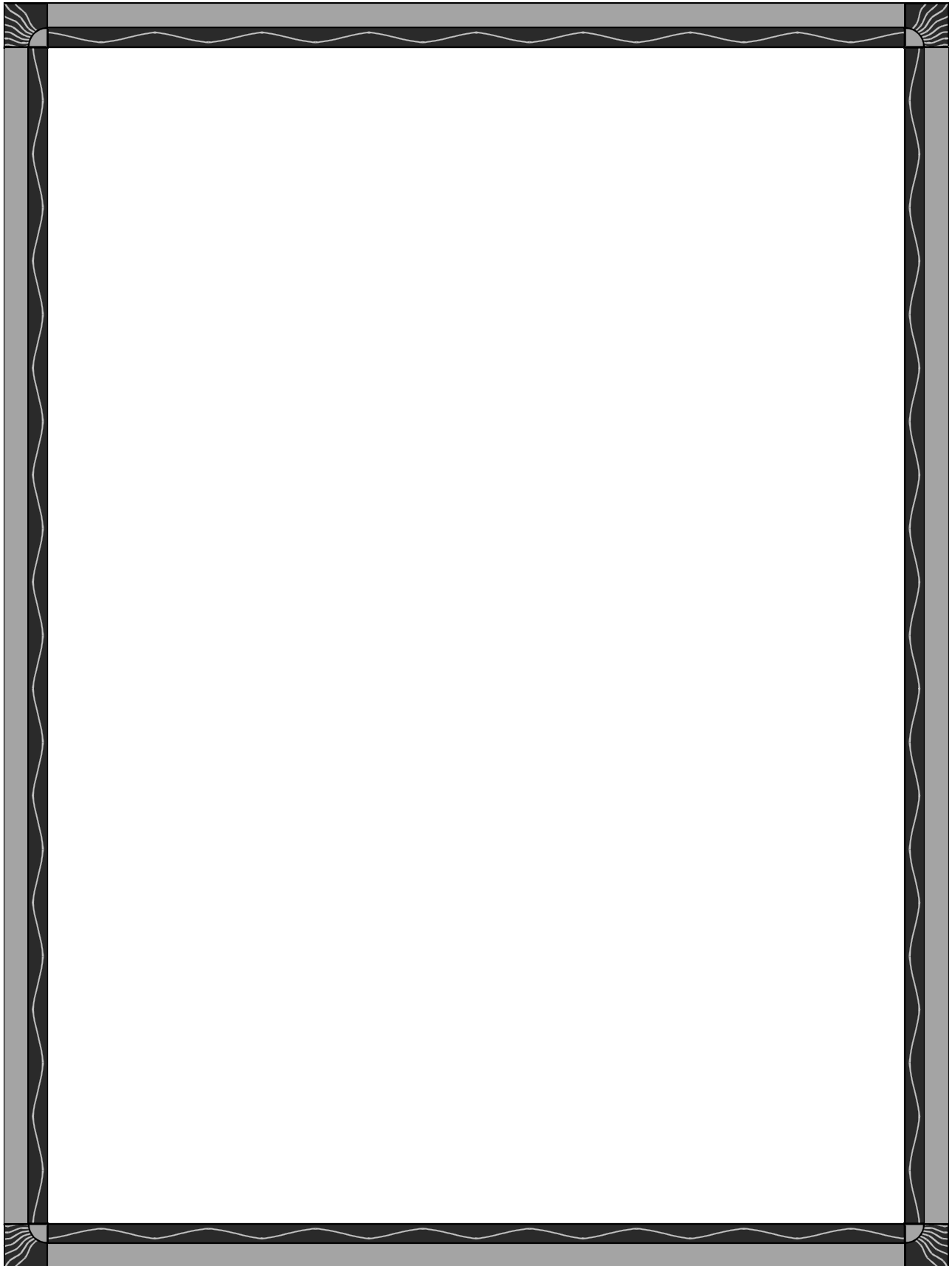
Draw a face from your imagination and give it a feeling name:



Ask someone you love to draw a feeling face and tell about their feelings:

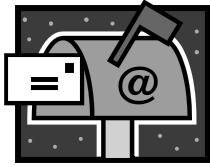






## My Family Has Changed

Draw a picture showing how your family has changed.



You've got mail...



## Let's write a letter or email...

Write a short letter to express your feelings about the changes in your family. There is no "right" or "wrong" way to write the letter. Here are some things to think about to help you get started:

- Be honest. Tell how you really feel.
- Use all the feeling words you can think of that fit you. Include all kinds of feelings.
- Tell what happened to make you feel the way you do.
- Write what might help you feel better.
- Write to as many people as you want (use extra paper).

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

---



---



---



---



---



---



---



---

Feeling words: *confused, happy, sad, excited, disappointed, surprised, mad, awesome, anxious, curious, afraid, lucky, stressed, relieved...*

From \_\_\_\_\_



What are your top three questions?



1. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

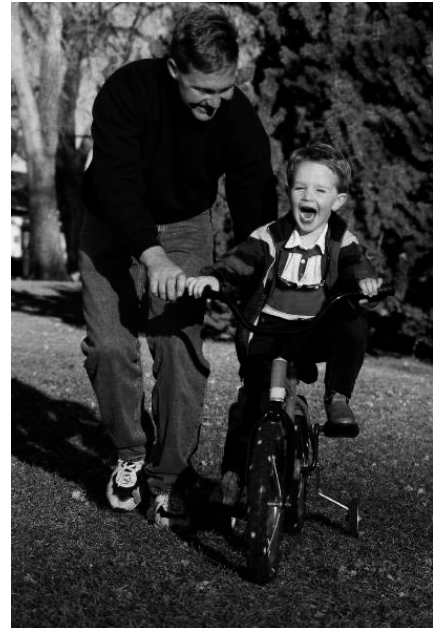
3. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



Ask your questions!

## Family changes bring up lots of questions.

Make a list of what you think will stay the same and a list of things you think might change.



These things will stay the same:

---

---

---

---

These things might change:

---

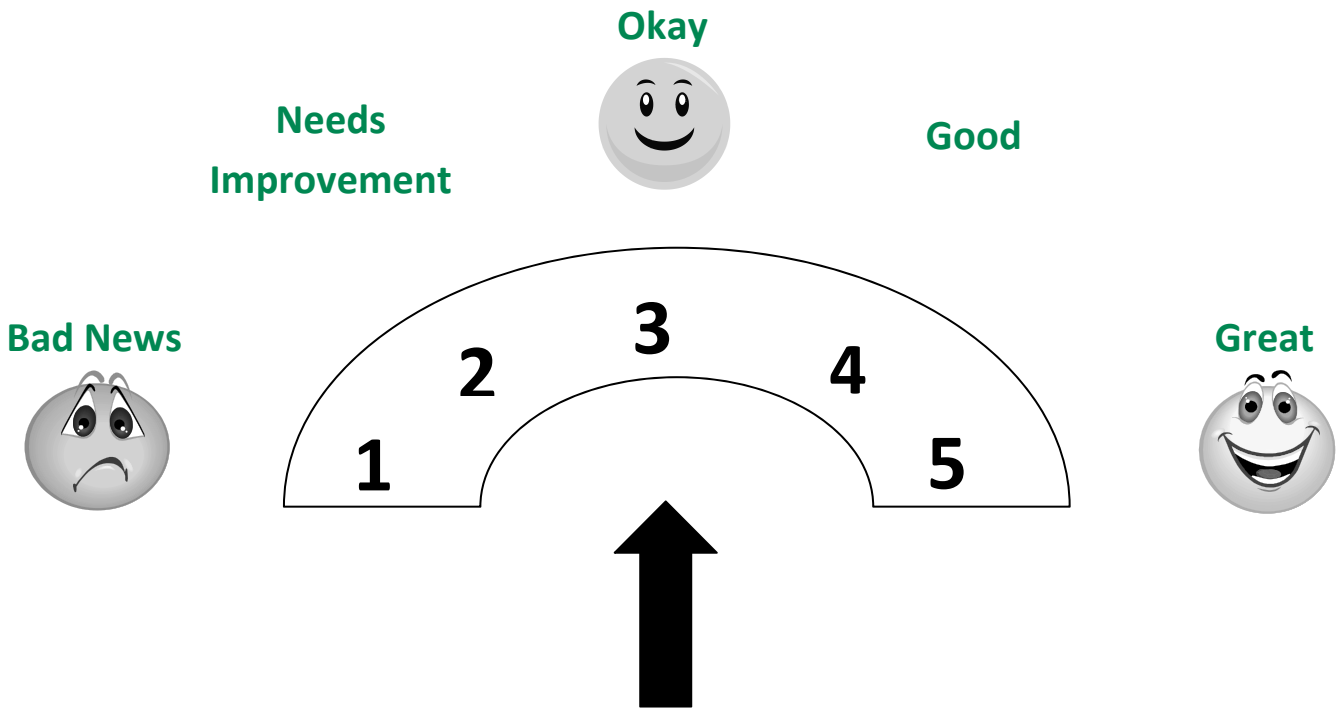
---

---

---

# Feelings Meter

Let people know how you're feeling by using this meter.



How do you feel about:

- \_\_\_\_\_ Schedule with your parents
- \_\_\_\_\_ Your day at school
- \_\_\_\_\_ Time with friends
- \_\_\_\_\_ Amount of homework
- \_\_\_\_\_ Weekend plans
- \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_  
(Your own words)

## Kids' tips for living in two homes:

- ❖ *Make sure I get to see my friends, cousins and grandparents.*
- ❖ *I want to be with my pets!*
- ❖ *I like to just be with my parent, no girlfriend or boyfriend over.*
- ❖ *I like to call or text my other parent.*
- ❖ *I keep pictures of my family by both my beds.*
- ❖ *I have doubles of what I use a lot like my toothbrush.*
- ❖ *I have a "launching pad" where I keep stuff that goes back and forth. I have a list of stuff I need to remember, and a big calendar that shows my schedule, no guessing.*
- ❖ *When I forget stuff no one gets mad and my parents make sure I get the stuff I really need, even if it's a pain! (like my bike)*
- ❖ *Being picked up and dropped off at school/childcare is the best.*
- ❖ *I get help packing and when I get home my bag is there.*
- ❖ *I asked my parents not to get into talking when we switch because I don't like waiting and sometimes they fight!*
- ❖ *When it's close to the time to switch I get a few reminders so I can finish what I'm doing.*
- ❖ *When there is crying or a sad face when I leave I feel sad and guilty.*
- ❖ *If I don't want to go, my parents remind me of the good times.*
- ❖ *I like it when one parent helps me make gifts or buy cards for my other parent for holidays and birthdays.*
- ❖ *Say "have fun" when I leave!*
- ❖ *My parents ask me what I like and don't like about my schedule.*
- ❖ *My fuzzy bear is always with me.*
- ❖ *My clothes are mine and I can take them back and forth, even my special stuff that one parent bought me.*
- ❖ *If I get to stay up late my other parent doesn't care as long as I get my homework done.*
- ❖ *When my school work gets put on the refrigerator I get help making a copy to show to my other parent.*

Add to this list and circle ones that you want to show your parents!



---

# Seminar notes

---

---

# Seminar notes

---

---



*Please share this handbook with family or friends  
considering family changes, separation or divorce.*

---

Original design by Communication and Technology Resources, University of Vermont Extension  
Printed by L. Brown and Sons Printing, Inc.

---

Visit UVM Extension at [www.uvm.edu/extension](http://www.uvm.edu/extension)

 Printed on recycled paper

---

April 2016 edition; first printed September 1998. Reprinted annually, revised periodically.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension Work Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture, University of Vermont Extension, Burlington, Vermont. UVM Extension and U.S. Department of Agriculture, cooperating, offer education and employment to everyone without regard to race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, and marital or family status.

