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### COPING AS A PARENT

When parents separate, they are usually at very different stages in the process.

It is essential that a parent take steps to cope as soon as possible because children need support and care of both their parents more than ever after separation

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### HELPING CHILDREN COPE:

- **Pre-school children** need reassurances frequently and in simple language. Preschoolers after separation need to spend one-to-one time with both parents and also need frequent contact.
- **School-age children** need honest and open communication with a listening parent. Each party needs to get agreement with the other parent and avoid putting children in the position where they have to take sides.
- Parents need to set aside special one-to-one time with their children on a regular daily basis.
- Again with **young adolescents** you need to communicate honestly and openly and go out of your way to spend time with them and talk and listen to them. Parents need to supervise their teenagers every bit as much as in intact families and need to avoid relying emotionally on their teenagers.

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## HELPING CHILDREN COPE -- SOME GENERAL PRINCIPLES

- Try to tell the children together and take time to plan what you're going to say.
- Choose a time when you can be with the children after breaking the news.
- Outline the main arrangements for their schooling, where and with whom they will live, where the other parent will live, and arrangements for ongoing contact with both parents and the extended family.
- Give a clear message that the separation is in no way the fault of the children and that there was nothing they could or should have done to stop it.
- Emphasise that although you, the parents, are separating, you will still be their parents. The conflict is between the parents, not between the parents and the children.
- Tell the children that both parents love them and that they would always be part of their lives.
- Check if the children have questions and be prepared to answer the same questions again over the next days, weeks and months.
- Children need to manage the process of telling others, for example, friends at school. Parents should help them through how they want to do this, and they should give a clear message that is not a secret or something of which the children should be ashamed.
- Give children time and space to express their thoughts and feelings
- Minimise the life changes your child has to endure.

- Maintain the quality of your parenting -- they need your encouragement, love and attention as well as your rules, guidance and boundaries, as much if not more than before.
- Being a good parent means accepting the other parent's role in your child's life and taking steps to support their involvement.
- It is crucial that you don't compete with your former partner for your children's love, and that you don't put your children in a position where they feel they have to take sides.
- Children should not be used as go-betweens between adults or as spies on the former partner.
- It is excessive conflict between parents, whether they are living together or not, which seems to have the most damaging effect on children.

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## CO-PARENTING -- NEGOTIATING WITH THE OTHER PARENT.

- Develop a businesslike relationship
- Maintain your independence and respect the other person's independence also
- Keep your feelings in check
- Keep your communication focused
- Communicate directly and openly with the other parent:
- Pick a good time to negotiate
- Listen first
- Give your view respectfully

- Think of mutually beneficial solutions
- If it is impossible to negotiate seek to call upon professional mediation or seek legal redress.

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## BEING A SINGLE-PARENT -- THE CHALLENGES

- Work constructively with the other parent
- Be organised
- Maintain the quality of your parenting
- Seek the support you need

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## WHEN YOU ROW EVERY TIME YOU MEET THE OTHER PARENT

- Organise the handover of children in a public place
- Deliver rather than collect the children;
- Communicate important information in writing, but keep it factual.
- Avoid using the children as message carriers;
- If difficulties persist seek professional help - a family counsellor or a mediator.

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## WHEN THE OTHER PARENT IS UNRELIABLE

- Try and discuss the issues and negotiate a different arrangement that suits everyone;
- Negotiate a plan B with the children -- how long the children will wait for the live away parent to arrive and what alternative activities are available should the promised arrival not occur.
- If the other parent drifts out of the children's lives be sensitive to the children's feelings.

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## BEING A LIVE AWAY PARENT

- Live away parents need to create a successful environment in which they work with their former partner to have regular quality contact with their children, and are a positive influence as the children grow up.
- Co-operate with your former partner in a businesslike manner for the sake of the children
- Keep your promises
- Be a responsible parent
- Be creative about how to stay in touch: by e-mail; by phone; by snail mail.
- Don't be disheartened by rejection
- Be patient in restarting contact.

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## NEW RELATIONSHIPS AND STEP FAMILIES

- Reassure the children repeatedly, by word and deed, that dating doesn't affect your love for them or mean they are taking second place.
- If you are dating, then there is even more need for you to set aside special time to remain well connected with your children.
- Take it slowly.
- It has to be a package deal.
- Children shouldn't be present when you are dating a new person.
- It's best early on that dating takes place outside the home and only in the home if the children are away.
- Give your children plenty of time to get used to the idea that you have a new partner before the first face-to-face meeting takes place.
- When your children have met your new partner, be open to their opinions and listen to what they have to say about the new person.

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## STEP FAMILIES -- WHAT CAN THE ADULTS DO TO HELP

### **The custodial paren**

- Take its slow and be understanding
- Support you children's relationship with the other parent
- Be sure you spend individual time with your children
- Work on developing a good relationship with your new partner.

## **The live away parent**

- Accept the role of the new step parent in your children's lives
- Maintain your own support and involvement

## **The new step parent**

- Take time to build relationship with your partner's children
- Initially become a supportive friend to your new step children
- Do not get too involved initially in discipline
- Work on developing a good relationship with your new partner
- It is likely that new rituals, rules and ways of behaving would have to be developed.
- It is really important to set aside time for the new family members to talk, share and get to know one another.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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