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Helping your children through the breakdown

When a relationship breaks down often the most important thing on the parents' minds is making sure that the children are as little affected as possible. It is a difficult time for the whole family and the children will become emotionally involved in what is happening. Unfortunately they are not yet mature emotionally so it can often be too much for them to deal with. They need your support and the fact that you are reading this shows that you are a parent that really wants to do the best for them.

So what can I do to help?

There are many ways in which you can support your children through the breakdown and beyond. The following tips are reproduced under crown copyright:

- children, especially younger ones, often think the divorce is their fault; listen carefully and reassure your child - perhaps many times over - it's not their fault
- separating or divorcing couples should try to avoid asking the child who they want to live with; it can place a lot of pressure on the child who may feel they are being asked which parent they love more
- older children may become resentful and even aggressive to one of the parents in a separation especially if they feel that one parent is 'to blame' for it; try to understand this but don't let it have a negative impact on the relationship between the adults or encourage children to 'take sides'
- stability (routines, schools, club times etc) is important while you and your family make the transition; be especially sensitive if a particular activity was usually linked with one of the parents - encourage your children to keep doing the things they like to do, but don't force them
- even if you feel angry towards your partner, you must not to let this boil over into physical or verbal violence; children can suffer a wide range of physical and

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psychological damage if they see fighting or other such behaviour and may be permanently affected

- try to resolve conflicts with your partner early; there are charities and other organisations who can provide counselling and mediation services to help you if you cannot resolve the conflicts yourselves - the longer you leave a problem unresolved, the worse it can be for your children, especially if the conflict is about them
- don't use your children to negotiate or to take messages for you and don't ask them to keep secrets or give you information about your partner - it's not fair to them and it may make them feel unhappy
- allow your children to be upset and show emotion; say that it is okay to cry and don't make them feel guilty about showing affection or concern about their other parent

Often parents, especially non resident parents, feel that they should buy their children expensive presents or take them on elaborate outings to compensate them in some way for what they are going through. However, a survey of 2,000 6-11 year olds, conducted by Cafcass (Children and Family Court Advisory Support Service), revealed that what children thought of as good contact time with their non resident parent was:

- showing interest in their schooling
- preparing meals together
- watching TV as a family
- playing football
- reading them stories
- going shopping together
- helping them through bad times

Children in the survey thought good parent contact time was about being 'looked after' by their parent, not about getting 'things'.

How much should I tell them about what is happening?

Most childcare experts agree that it is important to keep your children informed at every stage of your separation or divorce. You are not protecting your children by keeping things from them.

Tell your children what is happening to their family, it's better for them to know. They don't need every detail, but they do need enough information to know what is going on, depending upon their age. They may not wish to be involved in making decisions, but most children will still want to feel they are being listened to. Encourage them to ask questions and try to give them honest and reassuring answers, but don't promise what you cannot deliver. If something is not yet decided, then say so and reassure them that you will tell them as soon as you can.

To find out more talk to Tony, Rachel or Anne or visit www.gardandco.com.

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