

# ***Conducting Family Transitions in the Best Interests of the Children***

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In order to minimize the social, emotional and developmental harm children sometimes experience as a result of family transitions, we recommend that separated and divorcing parents adopt these six standards of behavior.

## **1. Keep the child out of the middle.**

No matter how you feel toward your estranged spouse, you still have a responsibility to that person as your co-parent, and a responsibility to serve the best interests of your child. Understand that your child is struggling to maintain a positive and loving image of both parents, despite those parents' obvious dislike of one another. Every time you expose your child to your anger toward your co-parent, intentionally or by accident, you are hurting your child. Be aware of what are your adult feelings and when you express them, and what are your child's feelings. Keep them separate!

This belief applies just as strongly to practical matters between parents. Do not ask your child to deliver messages or the support check to your co-parent. Deliver them directly. Don't ask your child to decide which weekend or holiday or month he or she wishes to spend with you. If the child is old enough, ask his or her opinion, but reassure him or her that you and your co-parent will make these decisions together.

## **2. Expect and allow your child's strong emotions.**

No matter how calm and reasonable or angry and abusive the separation process has been, expect that this family transition has evoked many varied and strong feelings in everybody involved. Your child will likely experience a wide range of feelings, including anger at you and his or her other parent, and at him- or herself, guilt, sadness, and fears related to future loss and abandonment. Your job as a parent is to help the child feel comfortable with any feeling he or she experiences, while setting limits on how he or she acts out these feelings. For example, a child must be allowed to be angry, but may need help learning what to do with this feeling.

## **3. Anticipate that your child feels guilty about the separation and hopes for a reunion.**

Emotion defies logic and experience. Children routinely blame themselves rather than blame a parent for a painful experience, and maintain a fantasy of family reunion long after a divorce is finalized and parents have new partners. Understanding these feelings can help a child cope with the separation and can help you understand a child's motivation in many otherwise confusing circumstances.

#### **4. Co-parents must work together to create a predictable, consistent and secure world suited to the child's needs.**

In the face of a family transition, children need security. Security can be created by assuring that some part of the world is stable and safe. It is only when a child feels secure that he or she will be able to cope with the strong feeling evoked by the family transition.

Predictability creates security. A child's advance knowledge about where he or she will be at any given time, with whom and in what activity provides security. Make a calendar suited to the child's age and ability that makes daily events and transitions among caregivers predictable.

Familiarity creates security. Help your child maintain as much familiarity as possible throughout the family transition. This may involve things as small as inclusion of familiar items from one home into a second home, or as large as avoiding changing daycares or schools or peer groups while the family is still in transition.

Consistency creates security. Establish and maintain the same rules expectations over time in each home, avoiding the tendency to "give in" because the child has "suffered so much." Unprecedented treats, rewards, and extended privileges do not help a child adjust to the family transition, even though they may make you feel better in the short run.

Consistency between homes is equally important. Minimize the differences in rules and expectations between homes by communicating and negotiating frequently with your co-parent. Do not fall victim to a child's efforts to "split" between parents: "Come on, mom! Daddy lets me do it!"

#### **5. Establish and maintain clear boundaries between the child's new families.**

You and your child and your co-parent formerly constituted a single family. The boundaries used to be between your family and other families. Now the child belongs to two families: mom's family and dad's family. Be clear what the boundaries are between these two new families. Do these two families go out to supper together? Do both families celebrate holidays together? Do belongings go back and forth between families or stay at one or the other? Often, it is important to keep families very separate and distinct, avoiding situations which will feed into a child's fantasies of reunion.

#### **6. Beware of your own guilt, anger and grief!**

You deserve your feelings, too. Be careful where and how and with whom you share your feelings. Chances are that showing the full extent of your feelings about the family transition to your child is inappropriate and even harmful to the child. Do not fall into the trap of letting your child take care of you. Take your feelings to friends, colleagues or professional helpers, not to your children.

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