

P.E.A.C.E.

(Parent Education and Custody Effectiveness)

P.E.A.C.E. is an interdisciplinary educational program for families that are reorganizing. It provides information on three topics:

1. The Court process for making child-related determinations;
2. The adult's experience of divorce and separation;
3. The child's experience of divorce and separation and how parents can help their children cope with this transition.

HOW WILL THIS HANDBOOK HELP ME?

This Handbook is designed to give parents who attend the program helpful information about what they learned during the P.E.A.C.E. sessions. It is written in a question and answer style that tries to address the questions many parents ask at P.E.A.C.E. sessions.

As a parent, everything you do has an effect on your children today, tomorrow and in the future. As you go through the reorganization of your family, *your children's best interests should be your top priority*. The suggestions in this Handbook have proven useful to other parents in situations that are similar to yours.

This Handbook is meant to inform, not advise. It is not a substitute for the advice an attorney or mental health professional can provide you with because:

- (a) it does not cover every aspect of divorce and separation; and
- (b) it is not tailored to your individual situation.

Some of the information contained in this Handbook may not be appropriate for families who have experienced domestic violence or child abuse. If you or your children are the victims of domestic violence or child abuse, you should seek help immediately. Contact an attorney, local police, mental health facility, domestic violence service provider, or crisis center for guidance. You may also contact the Abused Persons Program, 240-777-4195, or the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-942-6908, or the Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-342-3720. To help understand what domestic violence is, refer to page 15 of this Handbook.

CAN WE AGREE ON A PARENTING PLAN?

A parenting plan outlines the parenting schedule and responsibilities of each parent. In addition to establishing a concrete schedule for the school year, summers, and holidays, parenting plans should provide for the children's financial support. A plan can also establish which parent has the power to make certain decisions for your children, such as schooling and medical care. Many parents and children find that the plan provides them with a welcome structure and certainty during a time of change.

You can agree on a parenting plan without going to court. Some parents are able to work together to develop a parenting plan; others require assistance from a parent educator, therapist, or mediator. The best parenting plans are those that parents work out together, because there is a greater likelihood of cooperation between parents when the plan is reached through mutual agreement. Furthermore, negotiating a parenting plan is well worth the effort, because parenting plans offer detail and flexibility that court orders do not generally provide. Personalized parenting plans allow parents, rather than a court, to determine what is best for their children.

Parenting plans should be tailored to a particular family's needs. It is important to understand that as children get older, parenting plans may have to be adjusted to meet their children's needs. When parents get along reasonably well, a parenting plan should promote a close, ongoing relationship between parents and their children. *However, this kind of parenting plan may not be appropriate for families who have experienced domestic violence, child abuse or neglect.*

SHOULD WE CONSIDER JOINT CUSTODY?

Joint legal custody means that both parents are legally authorized to participate in making major decisions about the children regarding their health, education, and welfare. *Joint residential* means that the children spend frequent and significant amounts of time with each parent, although not necessarily 50-50. Joint custody only works for parents who can establish a cooperative working relationship, or who can at least separate their differences for the benefit of their children. Joint custody is not appropriate for parents who are involved in ongoing battles, domestic violence, or those who cannot find a reasonable way of working together. In those circumstances, alternative custody arrangements can be developed in which both parents have a relationship with the children without endangering their safety through constant parental interaction.

WHAT ARE THE ALTERNATIVES TO LITIGATION?

For some parents, mediation may be an appropriate alternative to filing a lawsuit. Mediation involves negotiations between parents with the assistance of a trained, neutral facilitator who helps parents reach their own agreement. This method of dispute resolution has advantages and disadvantages when compared to courtroom litigation. For example, situations involving domestic abuse may **NOT** be appropriate for mediation. Therefore, these alternatives should be carefully discussed with a lawyer before making a decision.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE PROS AND CONS OF LITIGATION CONCERNING CHILDREN?

Sometimes litigation is appropriate and necessary. When parents cannot agree on parenting issues after all reasonable efforts have been made, a court decision will be required. The court can award custody to one parent, set schedules for visitation, and make awards for child support. Court orders, such as those involving child support and visitation scheduling, are enforceable if they are not followed. Court intervention is frequently necessary where violence or abuse is a factor. It may also be necessary if a parent withholds *necessary* information from the other parent, or when counsel fees are needed for one side. However, litigation usually takes a long time and is very expensive. Litigation often fuels the anger and high emotions already present in these situations. Meanwhile, the children can be caught in the middle, to the detriment of their emotional well-being and relationship with one or both parents.



HOW CAN I FIND A LAWYER?

People often select a lawyer on the basis of referrals from friends or relatives. Referrals are also available through your local bar association or the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers. Be sure to ask prospective attorneys about their background and experience in divorce and family law.

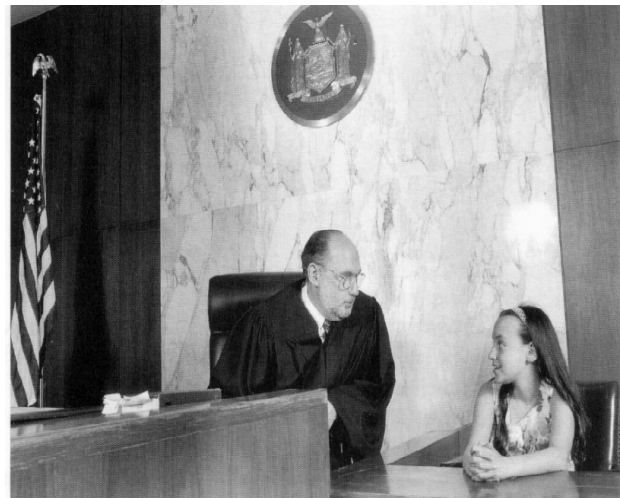
You may want to interview more than one attorney and consider the following questions:

- Were you comfortable during the first meeting?
- Were your questions answered?
- Were the fees within your price range?

A lawyer is one of your primary resources when you are considering or going through the process of divorce, or any other form of family reorganization. You should be clear about your relationship with your lawyer and what you can expect from it. You are entitled to know how your lawyer is planning to proceed in your case and what he or she thinks the likely outcome will be. You are also entitled to know how you will be charged and billed. Your lawyer is required to provide you with a written retainer agreement. Your lawyer's role is not to be your friend or psychotherapist, but he or she can help you with referrals to qualified mental health professionals.

WHAT CAN I EXPECT IF I GO TO COURT CONCERNING MY CHILDREN?

You can expect the courts to make a decision concerning custody based on the "best interests of the child." This is not an absolute standard, but an individual decision about what is best for your children. The judge must consider many factors as set forth in prior cases and generally makes a written decision explaining his or her reasoning. You can also expect the court to make a decision on the amount of child support to be awarded to the custodial parent in accordance with specific guidelines set by statute unless the facts allow a variation from these guidelines. Again, if there is a variation, the judge or Family Law Master must explain the reasons in writing.



You can also expect to hear about technical terms referring to the rules of evidence, jurisdiction and trial procedures. Your lawyer can help you understand these legal rules and some have been explained by your P.E.A.C.E. Program presenters. You and the children may also meet with the Guardian ad Litem, a lawyer appointed by the court, who will represent the children and an Evaluator who will report to the judge on psychosocial issues. Answers to other questions you may have are found at the end of this handbook in the section called “Commonly Asked Questions.”

WHAT CAN I EXPECT DURING MY FAMILY’S REORGANIZATION?

Many people who have experienced family reorganization described their feelings as being similar to those felt after losing a loved one. During this time, you may experience many different types of emotions. You may feel sadness and depression, nervousness and anxiety, anger and rage, joy and happiness, guilt and shame. Most people say that they experience more than one emotion and that their emotions seem to be unpredictable. This occurs because they feel vulnerable.

THE EMOTIONAL CYCLE OF DIVORCE OR SEPARATION

Usually people go through four psychological stages when they get a divorce or separate from an intimate partner. It is important to note that not all people go through the stages in this order or in the same time period. Some people go through the stages in six months while others take two years. Some people go through the stages before they even separate. Some people flip-flop through the stages as they psychologically work through the process.

Denial and Separation Shock

People in this stage usually say they either feel nothing or they feel numb. When people are overwhelmed by strong emotions, the brain has a protective mechanism that shuts feelings down. As feelings return people may experience strong feelings of panic, rage, and depression.

Psychological Conflict

Stage two signals conflicting feelings. People say they feel like they’re on a roller coaster. They’ll hear a special song and reminisce about the good times; a moment later they become angry at a memory of something their partner said to them. During this stage, the person reviews the relationship and questions what went wrong. Gradually people achieve a realistic definition of what the marriage represented and what their role was in its maintenance and its failure.

Identity Work

At this point, people begin to make the psychological transition from being a couple to being single.

Acceptance

In this stage the person has accepted the divorce or separation, has established a working relationship with the ex-partner, has begun dating, and is relatively content with his or her lifestyle.

HOW CAN I HELP MYSELF AND MY CHILDREN THROUGH THE PROCESS OF REORGANIZATION?

Develop a Support Structure

Surround yourself with your friends and close relatives. Have plenty of people whom you can call or visit when you are feeling lonely, when you want to go to a movie, when you need a babysitter, or when you need to talk. There are many support groups for people with similar problems that can help you realize you're not alone. Contact your local church, synagogue, recreation center, YMCA/YWCA or community center to learn when they meet. Keep in mind that this is the time when you will be making major legal and financial decisions. Try to have trusted friends, relatives, and an attorney with whom you can consult. Short-term therapy can be beneficial during this time. It can help you sort out your feelings from the past, and help you put your current feelings in perspective. Many counseling centers offer short-term therapy on a sliding scale basis and many have groups for families in transition. The Court Evaluators' Office can provide you with a resource sheet.



Keep Yourself and Your Children Active

Keep up your regular activities and start new ones. Create opportunities to discover new interests and hobbies and learn about yourself in a new way. People say that when they become independent, they begin to learn about themselves as individuals again, rather than as part of a couple. Arrange activities for yourself and your children. Check your local library or local newspaper to see what activities might interest you. It's also important to find time for yourself to do something that you enjoy.

Take Care of Yourself and Your Children

Take care of yourself physically as well as psychologically. Eat properly, exercise and get plenty of rest. Family reorganization can be one of the most stressful events in your life. The effect of stress on the immune system is well documented: it lowers the immune systems defenses and makes people more susceptible to disease. Therefore, it is important to stay healthy, calm, and relaxed. Remember, research has shown that one of the best predictors of children's post-separation adjustment is how the parent feels. If the parent has adjusted in a healthy way to the separation, the children will as well.

Plan All Holidays

Holidays can stimulate or intensify emotional reactions. Therefore, plan to be with other people during the holidays. Spend religious holidays with your family; go out with your friends on your birthday; make sure you are occupied on your anniversary.

Don't Be Ashamed

Research has shown that the less shame people attach to their situation, the easier it is for them and their children to adjust. The way you deal with your new arrangement will affect your children. If you feel ashamed, your children will react in the same way. However, if you view your family's reorganization as a healthy response to a bad situation, you and your children will find it easier to adjust and will do better.

Cooperate If It's Safe

Even though your relationship is changing, you will be parents forever. At the exact same time, both of you will experience all of the important moments in your child's life. Parents who put aside their differences and cooperate with each other are more likely to raise emotionally healthy children. Remember: in cases of domestic violence and abuse, cooperation may not be possible or appropriate. Discuss this situation with a lawyer, or find resources in your community to help.

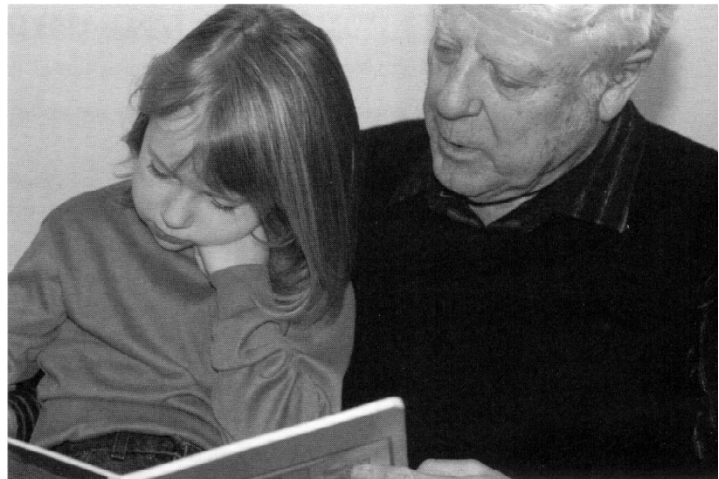
You're Only One Person and That's OK

You can't be two parents, and you don't need to be. However, you can be one good parent by spending quality time with your children. Even if you only have a little time to spare, give them your full attention when you're together. Instead of sitting in silence while driving your children places (e.g., soccer practice or dancing lessons or to the day care center), check on how they're doing in school, whether they're having any problems, what they did that day, who their friends are, etc. In addition, make bedtime a time when you spend five minutes talking about things that are important to them. Support their feelings by telling them they have a right to feel certain ways, give them a hug, and, above all, tell them that you love them.

WHAT ABOUT THE RELATIVES?

Telling relatives can be a painful experience, especially if they did not know there were problems. If appropriate, tell them together and reassure them that you both intend to maintain a regular relationship with them. Depending on how close you are with them, you may or may not want to give them all the details.

Many people choose to maintain a relationship with their children's other relatives for themselves and for their children. They can be especially helpful and supportive during this time of transition.



WHEN SHOULD WE TELL THE CHILDREN?

Children should be told only after a definite decision has been made. It is important to make it clear to the child that there is no chance for reconciliation, and that the decision is final.

After a definite decision has been made, the next consideration is the child's age. If a child is old enough to recognize the parent, he or she should be told. Children understand language much earlier than many parents think. The decision should be explained in a way that is appropriate for their age level.

If possible, children should be told two to four weeks before the parent moves out. However, younger children should be told closer to the actual time. Very young children do not understand the passage of time, so that if too much time has passed, they may think that the separation is not going to happen.

HOW SHOULD WE TELL THE CHILDREN?

Sensibility

How to tell your children is a personal decision and will depend upon the circumstances of your situation, including the age and maturity of your children and your relationship with their other parent. If appropriate, you may tell your children together.

Sensitivity

Remember, even though you are ending your relationship, you are still parents to your children. Your children may feel more secure if you tell them together. This way both of you can help the children adjust. You can show your children that you can cooperate to help them through this transition.

If you or your children are the victims of domestic violence or abuse, you may need to handle the situation differently. Under these circumstances, you should consult with an attorney or mental health worker to determine what is appropriate for you and your children.

WHAT SHOULD WE TELL THE CHILDREN?

Planning

Parents should decide in advance what they are going to tell their children. If appropriate, parents may plan together what they will tell the children.

Honesty is the Best Policy

Be as honest as possible. Telling the truth builds trust between parents and children. Parents should give general rather than specific reasons as to why they are changing their relationship. For example, parents could explain to the children that they cannot settle their arguments, or that even though they once loved each other, they no longer do. Parents should tell their children that they tried their best to solve their problems but they couldn't, and they feel family reorganization is in the best interests of everyone. It is important to remember that blaming the other parent is not only unnecessary, but it will also hurt your children.

It's Okay to be Emotional

When telling your children, it's okay to be emotional. Don't feel that you should hide your feelings. Expressing your emotions gives your children permission to freely express their emotions. They should feel free to ask any questions that they might have. Providing an environment in which everyone can openly discuss their feelings and concerns will help your children cope with these new changes.

HOW WILL THIS AFFECT MY CHILDREN?

Your Actions Directly Impact Your Children's Reactions

How parents react to their family's reorganization determines how their children react. They may display feelings of anger and sadness, or they may actually seem relieved. Research has shown that if parents behave in an informed and responsible way, the effects on children can be short-lived and minimized. If they don't, children may suffer long-term serious effects.

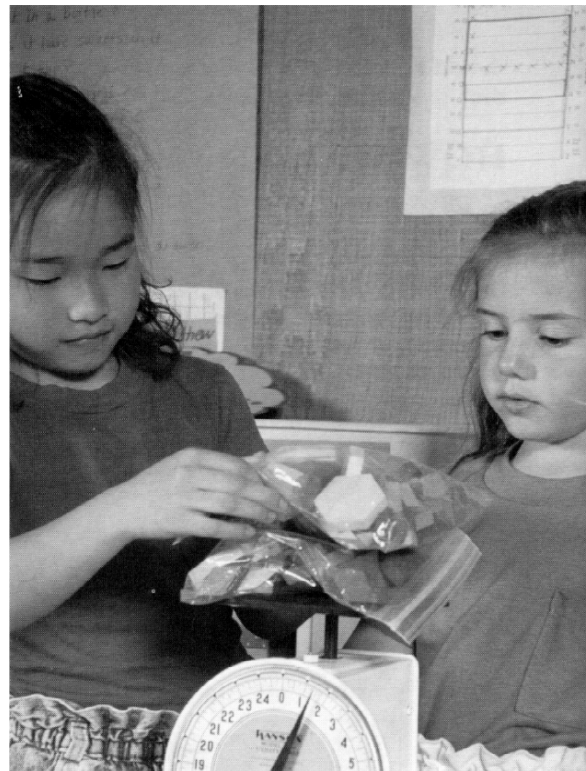
It is not the family reorganization itself that causes negative reactions in children. Rather, it is long-term exposure to family conflicts that causes problems for children.

Children Are Mainly Concerned About Themselves

Children are mainly concerned about the effects this change will have on their own lives. Many children fear that they will no longer have necessities, such as food, clothing, or even a place to live. For example, they will ask questions that relate to their own lives, such as, "Where will I live? How often will I see Daddy/Mommy? Where will my room be? Will I still go to the same school? Will we have to move?" Answer their questions as honestly and realistically as possible. Always reassure them that they will be taken care of and that you love them.

Children Often Blame Themselves

Sometimes children think they did something wrong and that's why their parents are not getting along. Children should be reassured that they are not responsible for their parents' problems. Sometimes children fear that if their parents stopped loving each other, they could stop loving them as well. Children should be reassured that their parents will love them forever.



Sometimes children may think that parents could just abandon them or ask them to leave. Parents should explain to their children that they are not leaving them, and that both parents will love them forever. Parents should reassure their children that the nonresidential parent is not abandoning them either.

Common Reactions

- Loyalty Conflicts. Children may feel pressure by one or both parents to reject the other parent.
- Fantasies of Reconciliation. It is often common for children to think about ways to get the other parent to return home.
- Anger. Children often experience intense anger, which may be directed at one or both parents.
- Insecurity. Children often worry about what will happen to them and their families.
- Alignment with One Parent. Older children will often side with one parent.

HOW CAN I MINIMIZE THE EFFECTS ON MY CHILDREN?

Certain factors influence how well children react to their family's reorganization. Some of the findings associated with positive outcomes are listed below.

Stable Loving Relationship With Both Parents

Tell your children that you value them and that their other parent does also. Remind the children that neither one of you is abandoning them and that you will both always be there to take care of them.

Children need to spend time with both parents. Both parents should spend a little more time with the children during the transition. Your presence will reassure your children that you care about their feelings and will also encourage them to express these feelings. If you are engaged in a custody dispute, your children will need extra love, reassurance, and attention. Tell them that no matter what the outcome is, you will love and take care of them forever.

Acknowledge Your Children's Feelings

Children have different reactions depending upon their age. Below is a summary by age group of some common feelings children may experience.

6 to 7 Year Olds

- are only able to focus on their present situation
- are more likely to talk about their feelings
- express anger and sadness
- avoid school and use stomachaches or headaches as excuses to stay home
- feel rejected by the non-residential parent

8 to 12 Year Olds

- become very angry at both parents or blame one parent
- lose interest in school or a favorite activity
- experience grief, anxiety, loneliness, and helplessness
- are easily manipulated by parents against each other
- attempt to care for parents
- complain about headaches and stomachaches
- wonder about the immediate future
- experience problems with concentration
- attempt to get parents back together

13 to 16 Year Olds

- avoid being involved in parents' arguments
- worry about money, particularly as to how the lack of it may affect them
- experience loyalty conflict when one parent begins a new relationship
- experience increased sexual activity, alcohol or drug use
- manipulate parents in order to get more freedom, clothes, etc.
- worry about their own future relationships
- spend more time with friends outside the home
- desire a flexible schedule for contact with the non-residential parent
- attempt to assume a parental role to younger siblings

Validate Your Children's Feelings

Help your children verbalize the feelings described above and then acknowledge them. Identifying with these feelings will permit your children to feel entitled to them. For example, "I know you're feeling angry," or "It makes sense to me that you would be feeling scared. There are a lot of changes taking place." Then reassure them that you will always be there to take care of them.

At this time children may express angry feelings. Do not take them personally. This might be difficult to do, but try to understand that the child is only trying to make sense out of the situation. They need your reassurance now more than ever. When your child is upset or angry, simply state back what your child has just said and then validate it. For example, "I hate you Mommy. You made Daddy leave." Response: "Right now you feel like you hate me because you think I made Daddy leave." This helps the child feel heard and also can help you to not take the child's anger personally.

Some children express their anger by becoming disobedient or stubborn. Help them to express their feelings in nonverbal ways by participating with them in activities such as drawing, clay modeling or playing with puppets. It will also help if you tell them stories about parents who have gone through similar changes and have continued to love their children. Your local library has many books that address children's concerns.

Avoid Blaming the Other Parent

If safe, a working relationship with the other parent concerning the children will benefit them. They will see that you can put aside your anger for their benefit, and it will help them to do the same. Never blame or criticize the other parent in front of the children, because it will only confuse them and may make them feel guilty. Give your children permission to love both parents.

Encourage your children to have a relationship with the other parent. It is crucial to their psychological development and provides the child with good feelings about both of you. Children fare best when they have an ongoing positive relationship with both parents. If the child complains about the other parent, encourage the child to take up the issue directly with that parent. Try to convey to your children that you are not in competition with the other parent. Don't ask them who they want to live with; they will feel torn in half. Let them know that it's okay for them to love both of you. They do not have to choose.

Encourage Contact with the Other Parent

Children adjust better if they maintain consistent, predictable and positive relationships with both parents and have regular, dependable patterns of contact. Generally, the more contact the child has with the other parent, the better. This creates fewer feelings of loss, abandonment, and helplessness. If the parental contact requires a structure, such as every other weekend, it is helpful to consider the ages and schedules of the children. Generally, the contact schedule should be as flexible as possible.

If you or your children are the victims of domestic violence or abuse, or if the non-residential parent suffers from a medically diagnosed mental illness and is incapable or unwilling to attend to the needs of the children, or is actively abusing drugs or alcohol, you will need to handle the situation differently. Under these circumstances, you should consult with an attorney or mental health professional to determine what is appropriate for you and your children.

Minimize Changes in the Child's Environment

If possible, parents should not impose too many changes on the child at once. For example, if the child is adjusting to having only one parent at home every night, moving into a new home or going to a new school may be too much for him or her to handle.

Avoid Loyalty Conflicts

Some children may feel guilty for having a better time with the non-residential parent on visiting day. Parents can help their children avoid a loyalty conflict. Residential parents can help their children understand that they might be having more fun because there are fewer restrictions placed on them. Non-residential parents can help their children by not spoiling them during their visits.



Shared Family Functioning

Families that provide a sense of sharing and emotional support for each other have better adjusted children. One easy way of providing the child with a sense of “family” is to continue family rituals. Maintaining family rituals around birthdays and holidays helps provide a sense of security for children, because it enables them to plan, predict and look forward to family events.



Be an Effective Parent

Parents who encourage and practice open communication within the family and provide stable, predictable environments with clearly specified rules will be more effective parents. Children need structure. Don't be afraid to discipline your children. Children need to know the limits of their behavior. Like most children, sometimes they test these limits.

Sometimes parents feel guilty about disciplining their children during their family's reorganization. These feelings arise because parents don't want to upset their children. However, children need to know they can depend on their parents, and by maintaining limits, parents help them feel secure.

One way to help children feel secure is to assign them duties and responsibilities. Children who are assigned age-appropriate chores adjust better.

SHOULD I SEEK THERAPY FOR MY CHILD?

Children usually have strong emotional reactions when their family reorganizes. Sometimes children need to talk to someone other than their parents. When this happens, it could be useful for the child to go for therapy.

There are different types of therapy and therapists. Unless there is a history of domestic violence, it is often helpful, especially with young children, for the entire family to be present at the therapy sessions. A psychologist, a social worker, a school guidance counselor, or your family physician may be able to help you decide what kind of therapy your child needs.



There are therapy programs available at a reduced cost depending upon your income. There may also be support groups in your community available at no cost.

Some early warning signs that might suggest your child needs therapy:

- Your child seems sad, abandoned, or depressed and is unable to snap out of it.
- Your child’s teacher suggests counseling because the child is acting differently in school.
- Your child displays overly aggressive behavior.

Because of the intense emotions they themselves are experiencing, parents sometimes forget how their children are being affected by the reorganization of their family. Sometimes they inadvertently believe that the children are as angry with their partner as they are.

RELATIONSHIPS—NOT LABELS

What’s important is your relationship with your children, not a label that may be attached to it. What’s also important is your relationship with the other parent. It takes both parents to make a parenting plan work. Because your children need and deserve the love of both parents, it is important that you read all of the suggestions below. Remember, the only label that matters is the one the two of you will share forever: Parent.

SUGGESTIONS FOR BOTH PARENTS

- Reassure your children that they are not to blame for the divorce or separation.
- Answer your children’s questions and concerns honestly and avoid including unnecessary details about the other parent.
- Reassure your children that they will be taken care of and that they are loved by both of their parents.
- Establish regular ongoing communication with the other parent - whether in person, by telephone, letter, fax, or e-mail - to discuss important issues, such as your child’s health and education.
- Keep each other informed about medical issues and important events.
- Plan changes in the access schedule in advance.
- Comfort your children if they miss the other parent.
- Don’t use the children as weapons against the other parent.
- Don’t withhold child support or access to “get back at” the other parent. This will only hurt your child and yourself.
- Don’t force your child to convey messages regarding such issues as pick up times and child support. These matters are best handled by you and the other parent.

- Don't discourage your child's communication with the other parent.
- Don't compete with the other parent by becoming overly generous with gifts.
- Don't change how you discipline your child simply because the other parent treats them differently.
- Don't interrogate the child about the other parent's activities.
- Don't use the child to "spy" on the other parent.
- Don't say bad things about the other parent or allow others to do so in the children's presence.
- Don't fight with the other parent in the presence of the children.
- Avoid canceling or postponing the children's visits unless absolutely necessary. When parents frequently miss visits, it hurts the children.
- Avoid criticizing the other parent's style of parenting.
- Avoid trying to settle conflicts between your children and the other parent.

IF YOU ARE THE RESIDENTIAL PARENT

- Make sure your children have the other parent's address and telephone number.
- Encourage your children to telephone or write letters to their other parent.
- Remind your children to invite their other parent to special events.
- Post a calendar so your children know the access schedule. Remind your children to get ready 30-45 minutes before the other parent arrives so they won't be late.
- Encourage your children to share toys, books, or homework with the other parent.

IF YOU ARE THE NON-RESIDENTIAL PARENT

- Be on time for your visits. Call ahead if you're going to be late.
- Make your home your children's home by keeping familiar pictures and other items around and by displaying their artwork. Make a place for their belongings. Give them their own room, if possible.
- Avoid using friends or relatives as primary caretakers during visits.

- Discuss household rules and expectations that may be different from the other parent's home.
- Introduce them to your neighborhood by taking walks and looking for other children their age.
- Be involved with your children's school and extracurricular activities. Attend activities that your children participate in.
- Avoid buying the children's affections by playing "weekend Santa." Most non-residential parents do mainly recreational activities with their children, such as visiting parks or playgrounds. Encourage your children to bring schoolwork with them.
- Maintain regular contact with your children. Telephone and write letters as often as you can.
- Be aware that as your children get older, they may prefer being with their friends rather than being with you.
- Pay your child support on time. Adequate finances are an extremely important factor in a child's adjustment to family reorganization. The residential parent will avoid feeling frustrated by having to call and ask for the money; the tension level in the home will not escalate; and your child's environment will be more stable.

A WORD ABOUT DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Domestic violence is a pattern of coercive control that one person exercises over another for the deliberate purpose of domination. **Abusers use physical and sexual violence, threats, emotional insults, isolation, and economic deprivation to get their way. Marital strife alone does not constitute domestic violence.** In an abusive relationship, the batterer's intention is to control their partner and to force that person to obey.

- Domestic violence affects all ages, socioeconomic, ethnic, religious, geographic, cultural, educational, and professional groups. Incidents of domestic violence increase in frequency and severity overtime.
- Custody and visitation arrangements in families with a history of domestic violence have to be structured very carefully. Joint or shared custody arrangements are not appropriate, and structured visitation should be utilized. Physical safety, for both the non-abusive parent and the child, should be the highest priority in shaping those arrangements. Where supervised or monitored visitation is ordered by the court, follow all directives carefully.
- Children who witness violence or abuse display the same emotional responses as children who have been physically and emotionally abused. A child does not have to directly witness the attacks on a parent to suffer emotional trauma. Children from abusive households find it difficult to develop trust, self-confidence, or positive self-images. They are also more likely to become abusers or victims of abuse later in life. Custody awards must consider the impact of domestic violence on children.

- Abused parents are especially vulnerable to increased levels of violence and abuse while they are in the process of reorganizing their families. If you are planning to leave an abusive relationship, you need to learn about safety measures. If you obtain a stay away order of protection, you may want to consider changing the locks. You may wish to speak to an attorney, the local police, a mental health specialist, or a domestic violence service provider about planning for safety.

A WORD ABOUT CHILD ABUSE

If you suspect your child has been physically, or sexually abused, do the following:

- Approach your child calmly and ask, “Are you okay? Is anything bothering you?”
- Help your child verbalize feelings.
- Consult your pediatrician.
- If your child’s behavior seems notably different, bring your child to a therapist who specializes in such issues.
- Consult with your lawyer as to what action to take.
- Never make an allegation of abuse that you know is false. This will only hurt your child and may significantly jeopardize your credibility in court.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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For more information on the original P.E.A.C.E . Program, please call

Hofstra University School of Law (516) 463-6011

or write

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