Helping children deal with divorce

It can be hard enough to watch your marriage dissolve without having to watch your children suffer too.



Just as every couple has its own reasons for divorce, every child deals with this kind of change in different ways. Some sail through the change with little disruption. Others may need a lot of care and attention to see their way through the transition.

During a separation or divorce, children of different ages might feel—and show—stress in different ways. For example:

Young children may regress to more infantile behaviour such as clinging, wetting the bed, tantrums or disrupted sleep.

School-age children may experience academic difficulties, disruptive behaviour and/or short-term difficulty with relationships.

- Teens may exhibit negative behaviours, poor performance at school and/or rebelliousness.

It's not unusual for children of all ages to blame themselves for the divorce of their parents. Assure your children that both parents still love them and that they are not in any way the cause of the divorce. Know that everyone will need time to heal and adjust to the changes.

Coping strategies

Be clear and honest. Children want to feel secure and know what's going on. While they shouldn't know all the sordid details of the divorce, they are likely to feel more secure if they are kept up to date on changes that will affect them. Be clear about facts such as where each parent will live, where the children will live, and when they will spend time with each parent.

Ask and listen. Children might have all sorts of thoughts and feelings about the situation, but they may be hesitant to bring up their concerns. As you're able, make space and time to ask them how they're feeling, and to really hear them out. If you're not able to provide this support, do what you can to ensure they have another adult in the family, or a counsellor to talk to if they need.

Give the children some control. Children often feel their lives have been turned upside down without anyone considering their feelings. Giving them back a little control can be helpful. Ask them how they would like to see the situation end up. What kind of things would they like to do when they spend time with you? How would they like to keep in contact with grandparents and other family members? While respecting the terms of your divorce, let your children have choices where they can.

Be a good co-parent. No matter how you feel about your former partner, he or she is still a parent to your children. Maintain respect for the other parent when talking to your children. Criticizing your former spouse puts the children in the middle and is likely to make them feel confused and unhappy. Messages for your spouse should always come from you and not be sent through your children. Civilized and respectful behaviour protects your children from adult game playing and demonstrates maturity.

Keeping these issues in mind will help you lead your children through the difficult emotions they may have regarding the divorce. If they are having a lot of difficulty coping, do not hesitate to seek professional counselling.