

Children and Parents Adjust to Separation - By Gary Drenfeld, MSW, RSW

Children and Parents Adjust to Separation

You haven't separated physically yet, but the ink is dry on your parenting plan agreement and you are ready to go your separate ways. Now reality bites!

Although many parents don't talk about it, the final act of separation cuts like a knife, particularly when previously living on a full time basis with the kids. Now ready to start a new home, you are struck by the fact you will not be with your children on a full time basis as accustomed. The sense of loss and upset sets in and for many is overwhelming. Few are actually spared the process of mourning, even those who initiated the separation. Some parents are actually surprised by the depth of sadness when this part of the separation takes hold.

As parents experience their first days and weeks without the children's company, many are left wondering what to do with themselves. They may be restless, agitated, have trouble sleeping or eating and may find themselves tearful with little or no provocation. These experiences point to the emotional adjustment that parents make to the separation process. Here is where some cry in their beer while others chat with friends or family and others seek the support of clergy or counselors.

To intensify matters, as parents are making their own emotional adjustment the children are on a parallel course, also adjusting to the reality of separated parents and separate residences and often a separate set of rules. Similar to parents in the adjustment process, children can appear agitated, depressed or anxious. Children may have trouble sleeping or eating or even concentrating at school. Here some parents point to the children's adjustment as the basis to re-evaluate the parenting plan. As such, some parents fight over custody and access issues supposedly on the basis of the best interest of the children, but at heart the objective is to lessen their time away from the children and hence soothe their own emotional adjustment. So what was just agreed to a few days, weeks or months ago, is now subject to re-evaluation.

What may be necessary however, is not re-evaluating the whole parenting plan, but offering strategies to ease and facilitate the adjustment process. There are several strategies available to parents and children to help out.

The first strategy is to allow time. Even though living through upset, parents need to understand that an adjustment process is normal and that in many ways, only time can heal the upset. Time is necessary for old habits to wane and new habits to develop. As new habits develop parents and children grow accustomed to the change and the new living arrangements.

The second strategy is to acknowledge the struggle. This validates it as normal. You don't have to feel bad about feeling sad. Parents can help their children acknowledge their upset by gently admitting their own. It is fair to say to a child, "I know the change is upsetting, I feel it too", Then go on to add, "But we will both feel better in time." The key is for the parent to not burden their children with their own emotional issues, but more simply to use their experience to validate their children's experience.

The third strategy is to talk to someone. This may be a friend, family member, clergy or counselor. The objective is not to change the circumstances, but to find a safe place to let out and share one's pain. For many people the mere process of acknowledging the upset, eases the burden.

The fourth strategy is to discuss the adjustment with the other parent and see if the parenting plan can be tinkered with, on a friendly basis and for a limited time. Sometimes, separation and new parenting plans can feel radical. The time between parent-child contact, whether person to person or by phone or email can be too long. Shortening the time between contacts can ease adjustment in the short term knowing that over time, time between contacts can be increased. Other strategies in this vein include the odd visit between residential changes, mutual attendance at extra-curricular activities, more phone calls and even having recent photographs.

Adjusting to the immediate change of separation and time with the kids can be onerous. If parents or children are finding the first days, weeks or even months particularly difficult, consider the above strategies before necessarily opening up a whole new custody/access dispute. It just may be that with a little more time, mutual kindness and consideration, the adjustment will take care of itself.

How long does it take to adjust? Several months to several years depending on the will, determination and mutual kindness of both parents.

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