



P.E.A.C.E.

**Parenting Education and
Co-parenting Effectively**

Santa Barbara Superior Court

Parenting Education and Co-parenting Effectively

For children, divorce can be stressful, sad, and confusing. At any age, kids may feel uncertain or angry at the prospect of mom and dad splitting up. As a parent, you can make the process and its effects less painful for your children. Helping your kids cope with divorce means providing stability in your home and attending to your children's needs with a reassuring, and positive attitude. It won't be a seamless process, but the following information about the effects on children, their development, and the mediation process may be helpful.



SANTA BARBARA COUNTY FAMILY COURT MEDIATION

In California parents are required to attend mediation prior to going to Court when there is a disagreement regarding custody and/or visitation of a minor child. Mediation is an opportunity for separating or divorcing parents to meet with a neutral professional in a secure environment to discuss future arrangements for their child/ren. The goal of mediation is to develop a mutually agreed upon, comprehensive parenting plan based on the best interest of the child.

Both parents must be present for mediation to occur. Children of the relationship who are 6 years old and older are required to be present for mediation. It is the responsibility of the parents to provide an adult to supervise children 6-12 while the parents are in mediation, or to take the children away once the children have been interviewed. Do not bring children under the age of 6 to mediation. If you bring children under 6, or do not bring an adult to supervise your children ages 6-12, the mediation may be cancelled and rescheduled.

You or your attorney may call to schedule an appointment for mediation in Santa Maria at (805) 614-6429 or in Santa Barbara at (805) 882-4667. Mediation is held at the offices of Family Court Services in Santa Maria at 312 East Cook Street, Building E (the new two story building), 2nd Floor, Santa Maria, California, 93454 or in Santa Barbara at 1100 Anacapa St. (first floor of the court house on the Figueroa Street, or South side of the building). Appointments can last up to 4 hours, so please allow plenty of time for your mediation. Please be on time. Additional appointments may be scheduled, if necessary. **Prior to mediation both parents must have completed the court-mandated requirement to attend the parent education class called: Parent Education and Co-parenting Effectively (P.E.A.C.E).**

Once an appointment is scheduled, cancellation with less than 7 days notice or failure to appear at a scheduled mediation may result in fines by the Court against the responsible parent or attorney. If either parent is unable to attend the mediation appointment, that parent should notify the other parent and/or attorneys as soon as possible. Only the parent or attorney who scheduled the appointment may cancel or reschedule the appointment. Mediation appointments are mandatory when ordered by the Court.

Domestic violence: If there has been domestic violence in your relationship, please notify the mediation secretary as soon as possible. Where there has been a history of domestic violence, or there is a current protective order, upon request you have the right to meet with the mediator separately and at separate times. You may also have a support person with you during the mediation. The support person's role is limited to providing emotional support. The support person is not allowed to participate in the mediation.

Interpreters: Spanish speaking mediators are available, although their availability cannot be guaranteed. You may be asked to bring an interpreter if a Spanish speaking mediator is not available for your appointment time. A family member, new boyfriend/girlfriend, or person involved with the case may not be used as an interpreter without the consent of the other parent, the attorneys and the mediator. A child can never be used as an interpreter for mediation. The interpreter's role shall be strictly limited to translating the statements of the parties and the mediator. The interpreter shall not offer their impressions or give the parties advice during mediation.

Confidentiality: According to local court rules, mediation is confidential: "All mediation proceedings shall be held in private and all communications between the parties and the mediator shall be deemed confidential. Statements made during mediation by the mediator, or by any party, witness or attorney shall be inadmissible in future hearings." (Section 1502)

For further information or questions, please call Family Court Services in Santa Maria at (805) 614-6429 or Santa Barbara at (805) 882-4667.



STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT: **Effects of Divorce/Separation on Children**

INFANTS – 0 TO 18 MONTHS

Infants can sense tension in their environment. The most important thing at this stage of development is for the infant to form a trusting bond with a primary, consistent caregiver. This caregiver could be Mom, Dad, or another individual. It is very important for the child that the same person be there as often and as consistently as possible.

When an infant notices the loss of a parent, the most common sign of trouble is regression, a return to behaviors normal at a younger age. There may be failure to thrive (when a child is unresponsive and fails to make developmental progress), eating problems, excessive crying and the child is difficult to soothe.

The child needs to be kept close to their primary caregiver. It is important to follow a consistent routine; keep the infant within a familiar environment as much as possible. Parents should be able to soothe the infant and hold and cuddle them as much as possible.

It is very important at this stage of development that a child feels loved and safe and that they can trust the parents to meet their needs.

TODDLERS – 18 MONTHS TO 3 YEARS

Toddlers typically feel intense fear when they are faced with changes. At this age, most children cannot express their feelings in words, so they will act out. Typically, they regress to an earlier stage of development when stressed, (Ex. want to suck their thumb), throw tantrums, fear being left alone, may cry inconsolably.

Regression needs to be understood by parents and handled with reassurance rather than criticism. Child needs to feel safe, loved, and that their growing development is supported. This is a time when the child needs to feel "I can do it!" – and that at least one loved parent is watching. At this age, children do not understand that something can be an "accident" and feel that everything is done on purpose.

Parents need to follow a consistent, predictable routine with limits, with consistent follow through. Actions speak louder than words at this age in particular. Child needs to be reassured that nothing about their behaviors has caused the divorce.

PRESCHOOLERS – 3 TO 5 YEARS

Preschoolers may feel fear of abandonment and responsibility for the parents' divorce as well as confusion. Children this age need to have a stable and predictable world. They should have to undergo as few changes as possible. Necessary changes should be introduced gradually with ample time for the child to adjust. At this stage of development children like to read the same stories over and over. Although this can be boring to an adult it is reassuring to a child. Preschoolers need to be allowed to take their prized possessions with them when visiting other parent (teddy bear, blankets, etc.).

It is also typical at this stage to respond to stress and change with regression. Other behavioral changes may include nightmares, unusual neediness (clingy, whiny) or angry behavior (hitting, breaking toys). At this age, children may become afraid of many things that did not create fear before the divorce. Room in both houses should be as similar as possible.

Parents need to understand regression as a natural part of the crisis the child is going through. Children are now starting to learn that a person can go, yet return. They need a lot of reassurance that the parent who has gone will return! They are now starting to identify their feelings (know what sad, angry or happy feels like). They need to talk about feelings and be given simple ways to deal with difficult feelings (talking about them, knowing that they are normal, allowing child to hit pillows when angry instead of another child). Children at this age demonstrate individual characteristics that parents have to take into consideration. Their needs and personality have to be taken into account when putting together a parenting plan. DO NOT make promises that can't be kept.

Children this age may feel responsible for the divorce since young children believe in "magical thinking" and think that they can "cause" things to happen. They also tend to take things personally. Ex., if Dad can hate Mom, then he can hate me.

IMPORTANT ISSUES FOR INFANTS, TODDLERS AND PRESCHOOLERS:

- Provide a safe environment physically and psychologically. No fighting around the children.
- Stability: Children need as few changes as possible at this time.
- Predictability: Give children similar rules and consequences at each home. Tell them when they will be with each parent.
- Do not give detailed explanations about divorce. Explain where they will sleep and who will take care of them.
- Reassure, reassure, then reassure some more about being loved, safe and that you will take care of them.



PRIMARY SCHOOL – 6 TO 11 YEARS

Children of this age range are very concerned about issues related to their family. They use the family stability as an “anchor” from which to go out and explore the world. This is a time when the attitude about family is reflected in “My Dad can beat your Dad” kind of statements. When a divorce occurs during this stage of development, it is very difficult for the child to accept. It is often in this age group that children get caught in loyalty binds during their parents’ separation or divorce, which is one of the most emotionally damaging things that can happen to children. A loyalty bind occurs when one parent has, usually indirectly, manipulated the child/ren to be on their side against the other parent. It is not the child’s idea, no matter how the parent has twisted the circumstances to appear that it is the child that wishes not to have contact with the other parent. It is usually aided by the other parent who is less than sensitive to the child’s needs and does not go out of their way to make the child comfortable and happy when they are with them, which makes it all the easier for the manipulating parent to sabotage visitation. Unfortunately, two wrongs don’t make a right and both parents usually claim the moral high ground while the child gets stuck in the middle of the high conflict and lots of court battles to solve the visitation issue.

Most children of this age will feel guilt, and a devastating sense of loss. They may also feel rejected and betrayed. Due to these feelings, most children wish desperately for their parents to get back together again. They may display a variety of behaviors to fulfill this wish... even telling their parents different stories that lead to a parental fight. For the child, it’s better to have parents fighting than having them have no contact with each other at all.

Problems that can be expected from children of this age may include; behavioral problems, depression (eating, sleeping, withdrawal), anger (at parent who “left” as well as at parent who “made” them leave), and school problems (inability to concentrate, acting out, slipping grades, etc.) Some children become the perfect child while other becomes angry or withdrawn. There are children that will take on adult roles and others that will regress to younger stages and want you to baby them. Some will show you how upset they are while some will hide their feelings and hurt from you. However, since you are the expert on your children, it is important that you pay attention and notice if your child is behaving in a way that is not normal for them. It may be a sign that the child is feeling stressed or depressed and needs some help.

It is best for Parents to avoid power struggles. All children need to feel that they are not going to lose a parent when their mother and father split up. It is important that the children are given structure and predictability and that the parents create as few changes as possible for their children.

"Family outings", picnics, going to the park, and other activities that include others are preferred for children of this age. Parents should include phone calls, letters, and some kind of contact during the week to keep in touch with school age children. It is also very important that both Parents attend the children's school and sports activities if at all possible. Even though 11 year olds can be critical and/or embarrassed of their parents, they usually want them around, especially at their events to watch them perform and tell them you are proud of them.

IMPORTANT ISSUES FOR PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN

MORE IMPORTANT THAN AT ANY OTHER DEVELOPMENTAL STAGE: PARENTS NEED TO ELIMINATE THEIR CONFLICT!

- Parents need to know that even though a child of this age appears more "grown up", they will not understand the reasons for a divorce so do not give them the gory details of the divorce, child support issues, etc.
- Avoid child becoming the little man of the house or mother's little helper.
- Reassure, reassure, and reassure some more that they are loved and that neither parent is going to stop loving them or going away permanently.
- Give your child permission to love both of you so they can grow up with a healthy relationship with both their mother and father. This gives them the best chance to become the person they were truly meant to be so they don't have to worry their childhood away about their parents' divorce.

ADOLESCENTS AND TEENS: 12 TO 18 YEARS

Adolescence and the teenage years are difficult times for children as well as parents. Under the best of circumstances, parents need to be prepared for problems. Adolescents and teens can be anxious, idealistic, and highly sensitive about the opinions of their friends and often see the world in absolutes (all black and white, good or bad, no in between). During this stage of development, it is not uncommon for teenagers to reject their parents' rules and ideas.

The primary need for teens is to break away from parents and family and establish their own identity and self-image. Starting at age 12, they are more interested in classmates and friends than in the family. By age 14, most teens are embarrassed by their parents and may feel humiliated by a divorce. Their primary concern about a divorce can be how it will affect their school and social activities. **Don't take it personally that your teen would rather be with their friends than with you**, their parent. This is just another part of the natural developmental process and says your child is on track for their age. If, on the other hand, they would rather be with you than friends their own age, this may be a sign of emotional problems with your teen. If they are either too dependent on a parent, or feel responsible for a parent, it would not be normal or healthy for a teen's development, and could have serious consequences with regard to the individuation process and choices made in their future adult life, i.e., career, spouse, children. Many life choices may be affected.

It is important to remember when you are in the middle of a struggle with your teen that it is a ***natural process***, and that your teen is just trying to discover themselves and grow into the strong adult they will become someday. Also, try to remember when you went through the same kind of struggle with your parents; it may be over the very same things. It is important to set limits with teens, but to also allow them to make enough choices that will lead to increased self-esteem and growth.

Parents need to be aware that although teens may appear to be only concerned with them; they still care about what is happening with the family. They can be deeply affected by a sense of loss and a feeling that the family unit they have always known will never be the same. A teen's crisis may be very similar to the parental crisis, with feelings of depression, anxiety, anger and frustration.

Adolescents may be aware of some of the parental and grown-up issues but have no personal sense of reference to be able to deal with those issues. That is the reason that adolescents should also not be given the details about the separation or the divorce (it is only when children become adults, and even then only when it is helpful to their own situation, that negative details of a parental divorce should be disclosed to them.) Adolescents and teens may be extremely sensitive and un-accepting of parental behavior. They normally resist a new partner in the life of their parents and can make it very difficult for a parent to have or start a new relationship. Parents should be very patient and introduce the new person slowly to the children if they hope to have them accept that person in the long run.

Parental visits need to be structured to accommodate a teen's busy life. When caught in the middle of a conflict, teens often choose to end the relationship with one of the parents in an attempt to make their own life easier. This is not a good solution for either the teen or the parent and can have negative effects on the teen's important adult choices in the future (i.e. husband/wife, career, etc). For children to mature into healthy adulthood, they need to have a resolved relationship with both their mother and father.

It is doubtful that any divorcing parent intends for their child to end up with an unresolved relationship with the other parent if they truly understand the emotional price that a child pays. Parents either don't understand, or are just so caught in their own pain that they don't think about what it is like from their child's point of view.

Parent Education is an attempt to help parents stop to think about what it is like to see things from their children's point of view and how children see their parents' separation and divorce. The hope is that if parents do this, the outcome for their children will be better in the long run.

IMPORTANT ISSUES FOR ADOLESCENTS AND TEENS

- Support your child's relationship with the other parent
- Realize your teen's need to separate from both parents in order to become their own person.
- Do not take it personally when your teen would rather spend time with their friends rather than with you or family – remember it is their developmental task.
- High conflict between the parents can cause fear, poor school performance and behavioral problems.
- Give your teen permission to love both parents so that they can grow up with a healthy relationship with both parents and blossom into the beautiful person they were meant to become.

Stages of Grief

When a family breaks up it means big changes for everyone. Changes cause a certain amount of stress in even the most resilient people. Everyone involved, whether the changes were their choice or not, is grieving a loss. This handout offers information and suggestions for families during the initial stages of family separation:

1. **Children** have many common feelings that come up when they learn that Mom and Dad will no longer be together.
 - **ABANDONMENT** - young children worry, "Who will take care of me?" Kids often feel as if the parent who leaves the home has left **them** and take this feeling of abandonment very personally. Even teenagers have this sense, though they may be unable to acknowledge it to others or themselves.
 - **ANGER** - kids feel upset about what is going on. For example: having no control over parental choices, feeling abandoned, etc. This is normal. Kids should be allowed to express these feelings.
 - **GUILT** - Most children feel that they somehow caused the break up of the family. This can lead to a number of behaviors such as anger, perfectionism, and self blame. They may also believe that if they try hard enough to be good, their parents will get back together.
 - **ANXIETY, DEPRESSION, NERVOUSNESS, LACK OF CONTROL, and RAGE** are commonly experienced by children during stressful times.
 - **LOW SELF-ESTEEM** - An accumulation of the feelings above can lead to a child experiencing low self-esteem.
 - **WANTING TO LIVE WITH OTHER PARENT** – "I'll go live with Mom/Dad!" This is a typical statement made when children are angry. It has nothing to do with where they want to live. What the child is saying is that s/he is angry with you and is using this as a way to express anger. Don't respond by saying, "Go live with him/her, then!" that is missing the point and saying to your child that it is not O.K. for the child to be angry. Do say, "I know you're angry."
2. **Parents** also feel many intense emotions.
 - **DENIAL** - pretending that the break up did not occur or thinking it isn't permanent. Thinking that you and your children will breeze through this major event with no problems. Failing to recognize your needs or your kids needs.
 - **GRIEVING** - The process of recovering from a loss as significant as the break up of the family can take several years. It involves recognizing that the loss will be felt over a period of time. It may include feelings of sadness, anger, blame, failure, guilt, and then finally resolution.
 - **INSECURITY** - Did I do the right thing for myself and my children? Will I ever find a new mate? Am I attractive/lovable? Will my children ever act the way they used to? What am I doing wrong? My kids seem out of control? So many feelings of insecurity come up for parents as they make adjustments in their life and the lives of their children.

COMMON REACTIONS OF CHILDREN AND PARENTS TO DIVORCE

- **"I'll go live with Mom/Dad!"** This is a typical statement when they are angry. It has nothing to do with where they want to live. What the child is saying is that s/he is angry with you and is using this way to express her/his anger. Whether it is the 2 year old who says "I don't like you anymore!" or the teenager who says "You are too strict!" Don't respond by saying "Go live with him/her then!" (That is missing the point and saying it is **not** okay for the child to be angry.) Instead, say "I know you are angry." Remember, anger is a behavior that can stem from feelings of abandonment.
- **Don't view yourself as a failure.** You will only make life much more difficult for yourself and for your children. All normal people make mistakes; it is no sin to err. Try to forgive yourself and the other parent, and concentrate on raising your children in a healthy manner.
- **Don't use your children** to meet your adult needs for companionship. Burdening your child with the divorce, financial, or personal problems, or the failings of the child's other parent will eventually lead to emotional problems with your child. DO NOT discuss any problems about your former spouse (the child's mother/father) in front of the children, whether directed at them or someone else in the house. It is **extremely detrimental** for children to hear negative information about either parent.
- **Don't force children to choose one parent over another.** Children cannot choose because their own identities include aspects from both parents: rejecting a parent means rejecting or feeling bad about a part of themselves. Asking children to choose or voice a parental preference gives them too much responsibility which creates anxiety and loyalty conflicts.
- **"You oughta"** Roles are changing, the other parent is no longer your spouse, yet you still have certain expectations of his/her behavior in relation to your former existence together. Before making a request or having an expectation ask yourself, "Could I ask Jane Doe (a neighbor) to do this for me? This might be helpful as a reality check.

What To Tell Your Children

Parents are often hurt, confused, and feel unprepared to deal with the needs of the children during separation/divorce. Children experience pain, confusion, rejection, abandonment, and fear when parents are separating. The following suggestions may help you to help your children through the process.

1. Give your children simple explanations. DO NOT tell them or let them hear the "gory" details of the break up.
2. Tell them where each parent will be living.
3. Reassure your children they will continue to be taken care of and they will be safe and secure.
4. Your children see that parents sometimes stop loving each other. Explain that a parent's love for a child is a special kind that never changes.
5. When talking to the children about the break-up don't use the expression, "We don't love each other any more" because children worry that if parents stop loving each other, parents may stop loving the children.
6. Children may feel responsible for causing the divorce. Reassure them they are not to blame. They may also feel it is their responsibility to bring parents back together. Let them know your decision is final and will have to be accepted.
7. Often single parents feel guilty and become overindulgent because their children have to go through a divorce or break up. Give your children love and limits; they need consistency more than they need to be spoiled.
8. Spend time every day with each child, individually, to give him/her special attention.
9. Your child is still a child and shouldn't become the "man of the house" or a "little woman". Continue to be a parent to your children and the adult of the house. Seek out other adults to fill your need for companionship.
10. Avoid the many situations that place children in the impossible position of trying to please both parents or trying to choose which parent to please. It is never a child's responsibility to choose which parent to spend time with, which parent's side to be on, or which parent will "get" custody of the child.
11. Don't use your children as a way to get back at the other parent. Children can be terribly wounded when caught in the "cross – fire".
12. Throughout your life, you and the other parent will continue to be co-parents of your children. Pledge to cooperate responsibly toward the growth and development of your children as an expression of your mutual love for them.
13. A break up can be a time of loss for each family member. You are entitled to reach out for support and comfort, but not from the children.
14. Be patient and understanding with your children. Be patient and understanding with yourself.

WHAT TO DO FOR YOURSELF

- Seek out support from friends, therapists, ministers, and other parents in similar situations. Deal with your emotional turmoil OUTSIDE of your home and away from your kids. Do not use the children to meet your emotional needs or as a replacement for your partner. Do not discuss any problems regarding the children's other parent whether speaking to them or to someone else. Even if your child is mature, this is extremely harmful.
- Develop new activities and hobbies that will contribute to rebuilding your self-esteem.
- Separate your own issues about the other parent from parenting issues. Remember you are no longer girlfriend and boyfriend, husband and wife, but will always be Mommy and Daddy.
- Don't view yourself as a failure. You will only make life much more difficult for yourself and for your children. All people make mistakes.



Exchanges

Children naturally have trouble making transitions, especially when the transition causes feelings of anxiety. Getting kids accustomed to smooth exchanges takes time and effort, but eventually children learn what to expect.

1. Reasons why children have trouble with exchanges:

- Children feel **mixed loyalties** and worry about pleasing one or both parents. These feelings may be based on real or imagined concerns; however these feelings can also be based on parental conflict. The child may seek to please parents to reduce potential conflict and/or to demonstrate loyalty to the parent s/he is with at the time.
- Children feel a **lack of control** over what is happening in the family's life. Young children may cry during, before, and after exchanges, they may throw tantrums, hide, or express lack of interest in seeing the other parent. Older children get angry, verbalize anger and negativity, and sometimes will lock themselves in their rooms.

2. What to do to help your children through exchanges:

- Allow the child to take a familiar object with them; something comforting like a blanket or stuffed animal is best.
- Have a predictable schedule that has few, if any, exceptions, especially for the sensitive child.
- Discuss only the child's immediate needs with the other parent - be polite and business-like.
- If you cannot use a "normal" tone of voice then hand the other parent a note. **DO NOT USE THE CHILDREN TO PASS MESSAGES.**
- Prepare ahead of time for the transition - rushing is stressful and will produce anxiety.
- Always prepare overnight bags for the children, even teenagers – as the parent, this is your responsibility.
- Have the children ready on time for pick-ups and drop-offs.
- Make exchanges prior to a regularly scheduled event (i.e. before school, before bedtime, etc.) to ease the transition and to allow more rest and unwinding time.
- At least 30 minutes before the transition (exchange) have the children involved in a quiet activity. Make sure they "wrap up" what they are doing before the pick up time.

3. If problems persist, explore the following:

- Are there on-going conflicts at exchanges? If so make alternate exchange plans to eliminate parental contact.
- Is the schedule age appropriate? For example, young children need more frequent but shorter visits while older children may need longer time periods with the non-custodial parent. Sometimes what is needed is more time, not less time.

- Do you spend enough quiet time alone with your children? If your home has other people present during the visit, be sure to spend some time alone with your child, separate from other adults and children.
- Do your children know it is O.K. to love and respect the other parent? Are you demonstrating verbally or non-verbally (tone of voice, eye rolling, etc.) that the other parent is not O.K.? This is extremely stressful for a child.

4. **Difficulties after the exchange/following the visit:**

- Children almost always have difficulty with the separation, and experience a loss every time they change houses. Common behaviors after the visit may include anger, irritability, tantrums, difficult behaviors, or a bad mood. This is natural, as there is usually an adjustment period no matter how great things went at the other home.
- Sometimes children misbehave because they know this may cause parents to have contact with one another, even if parental contact includes fighting!
- Children are frequently tired and/or hungry. This can be another reaction to the excitement and anxiety of the exchange.
- Children may express dissatisfaction about the time spent with the other parent. Before assuming the worst, consider the following: Children complain just like anybody else and just want to be heard. Some children leave out significant parts of the story when giving details about an event at the other parent's home; "Mommy wouldn't let me call you, the child may say. The child fails to mention that it was one hour past his bedtime and he was mad at mom about a disciplinary action she had taken. The child may be telling you what s/he thinks you want to hear - it is more common than you think. Parents get so involved with their own issues related to the other parent that it is very easy for them to accept negative information about the other parent from their children without checking it out.

5. **How to help kids:**

- Tell the child before the exchange about the upcoming time with the other parent (custodial or non custodial), how long the child will be with the other parent, and when they will see and/or hear from you next. Show the children a calendar. If you know about an exciting event coming up during time with the other parent, discuss it with the kids. **Be positive about the upcoming contact with the other parent, even if you are going to really miss the children don't let it show.** Children are very sensitive to their parents' feelings and need to know that you will be O.K.
- Verbal children can express feelings. Ask why the child doesn't want to go to or come to the home. Ask what things s/he likes the most at the other parents home. Ask if s/he is afraid of something happening while s/he is gone. Ask them what would help them to feel better.

