



MULLINS & TREACY
SOLICITORS, MEDIATORS & NOTARIES

CLIENT FOCUSED - RESULTS DRIVEN

SURVIVAL PLAN FOR PARENTS

In the separation/divorce process

An information booklet

T: 051 391 488 051 640 352
F: 051 391 489

W: www.mullinstreacy.ie
Email: reception@mullinstreacy.ie



MULLINS & TREACY
SOLICITORS, MEDIATORS & NOTARIES
CLIENT FOCUSED - RESULTS DRIVEN

T: 051 391 488 051 640 352

F: 051 391 489

W: www.mullinstreacy.ie

Email: reception@mullinstreacy.ie

REMEMBER GOING
TO COURT SHOULD
BE A LAST RESORT
NOT A FIRST
OPTION

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	01
SOME TIPS	03
FOCUS ON CHILDREN	04
BEING PART OF THE SOLUTION NOT THE PROBLEM	05
Through Mediation	05
Through your solicitor	06
Apply to Court to Make an Order	06

INTRODUCTION

Relationship breakdown is a sad and stressful event in the lives of those going through it. The decision to separate/divorce is a process rather than a single event. It takes time for a relationship to get into difficulties. The parties may struggle with those difficulties for some time before they decide that they cannot be resolved and decide to part. It is tough on adults and it is just as tough on children. It takes time for everyone to recover.

The way in which a couple handle their separation or divorce can make a huge difference to how well their children adapt to the inevitable changes in their lives. This puts the responsibility on divorcing or separating parents to do their very best to make sure that their children come through with the least amount of damage. This is not an easy task for parents to achieve at probably the most stressful time in their lives BUT it is good to know that you, as parents can achieve this for your children.

The longer children have been exposed to their parents' conflict before, during and after separation/divorce, the more serious will be the long-term psychological damage to their children. Negative effects can be avoided or minimised if parents can focus on the needs and welfare of their children regardless of their own anger or hurt with their estranged partner.

This short booklet has been written by Solicitors and Mediators as a guide to help couples who have children and who are going through a separation or divorce process, to provide the best outcome for their children. There has been much research on the outcome for children of their parents' separation. There are many good books written for parents on this topic. Parents can overlook how children themselves view their parents' separation. This booklet is therefore interspersed with extracts from 'Children's experience of Parental Separation' published by the Children's Research Centre, Trinity College, Dublin with whose kind permission these extracts are made available.

“ I’D NO IDEA, SO
WHEN IT DID HAPPEN,
I WAS IN TERRIBLE
SHOCK FOR A LONG
WHILE. ”

Girl aged 15, one year since separation

SOME TIPS – DO

- ✓ Support your child's relationship with the other parent—it allows him/her the freedom to be a child.
- ✓ Try to make decisions relating to the child jointly and then stick by them
- ✓ Reassure your children that they are loved by both of you
- ✓ Assure them they are not responsible for your decision to separate/divorce
- ✓ Talk to your children about your decision to separate/divorce together at an agreed time and the changes that will ensue in your
- ✓ Understand that your children will be
- ✓ Reassure them that they won't lose either of you
- ✓ Be as respectful and polite to the other parent as you would be to a stranger
- ✓ Have your children ready on time
- ✓ Have regular and consistent access to your children if you are not living with them. Your children want and need your time
- ✓ Understand that children benefit from stability and consistency in their lives
- ✓ If drink, domestic violence or drugs are part of the problem then get professional help

“ WE ALL, LIKE, DISCUSSED IT AND TALKED ABOUT IT, ANYTIME ANY CHANGES WERE GOING TO HAPPEN LIKE. SHE'D ASK ABOUT THEM. ”

Boy aged 15, two years since separation

SOME TIPS – DON'T

- ✗ Criticise the other parent in front of the children – it will damage their self esteem
- ✗ Make them a 'go between' in communicating with the other parent
- ✗ Make them choose between you as parents
- ✗ Let them act as your caretaker
- ✗ Drag them into the issues of your separation/divorce
- ✗ Row in front of the children
- ✗ Disappoint your children by not turning up or by being late
- ✗ Quiz your children when they return from access

“ MY MUM TELLS ME ONE THING AND MY DAD TELLS ME THE OTHER, I DO FEEL CONFUSED YES ”

Girl aged 15, one year since separation

FOCUS ON CHILDREN

When a relationship breaks down to the point of separation/divorce there is inevitably a lot of anger, sadness and resentment by one person towards the other. It is not unusual for respect for or trust in the other parent to diminish or disappear. Love and tolerance can turn to hate and intolerance. Behaviour that was tolerated and forgiven during the relationship can become a flash point for irritation and anger when the relationship is over. Each person knows the other's weak spots.

Every child has two parents and they draw their own identity from their two parents. Children realise at an early age that they are part 'Mummy' and part 'Daddy'. If one parent runs down the other parent to the child, or does so in the presence of the child, the child sees it as criticising a part of himself or herself and so their self-esteem is damaged. Good self-esteem is an essential ingredient of emotional health.

Once you have children, it is not possible to walk away from them at the end of your relationship. The relationship between you and your partner may be over but the parenting relationship needs to continue for the sake of the children. Each parent needs to learn the skills necessary to work with the other parent – for the sake of the emotional health of your children. This is not easy. Your own self-esteem may have taken a significant blow by reason of the separation or divorce. To help your children you may need to seek help yourself. Getting counselling for yourself is a very good idea and should help you recover and move on in your life.

“ I KNEW I COULD HAVE CONTACT WITH HIM 'CAUSE MY MUM SAID THAT WHENEVER WE WANTED TO SEE OUR DAD, WE COULD...SHE WASN' T GOING TO STOP US HAVING A RELATIONSHIP WITH OUR DAD. ”

Girl 16, six years since separation.

BEING PART OF THE SOLUTION NOT THE PROBLEM

Children are reassured when they know their parents are in control and are making good decisions about them. They will especially want that reassurance in the context of separation or divorce. Continued co-parenting through joint- custody with the other parent, post separation or divorce is a very practical way of showing children that both of their parents remain committed to them. Of course this is not easy, but it is possible and it is most certainly worthwhile.

There are a number of ways you as parents can work out what is the best parenting plan for your children:

1. THROUGH MEDIATION

When communication between you is difficult, stressful or has broken down it is helpful to work out the detail of a Parenting Plan together with the assistance of a trained Family Mediator. You are helped to manage conflict in a way that protects the best interests of your children. Your mediator will help you consider how you can keep as much continuity and stability as possible in your children's lives. You will decide together where your children will be living, what you will put in place to ensure that your children have as much contact with each of you as possible and how your children will be financially provided for.

A Parenting Plan is a carefully devised schedule which sets out the above in detail but also can include how you will make decisions about your children – details on school arrangements, child care, holidays, pocket money.

A Parenting plan provides continuity for your children in their relationship with each parent. They know when they will be with each of you. A parenting plan provides a structure so everyone is clear about future living arrangements. Clearly agreed plans help to reduce conflict.

When parents communicate constructively, they avoid the difficulties children experience when they feel caught between two parents whom they love.

Your Parenting Plan is a flexible plan which you can change as your children's needs and interests change and as they get older. Your children need to be listened to when expressing their views and concerns.

If mediation is not available in your area, contact the Mediators Institute Ireland for a list of accredited mediators- see Helpful Organisations.

You tailor make the plan to the needs of your family.

2. THROUGH YOUR SOLICITOR

You may well be seeing a solicitor in relation to the other legal issues, which come up in the context of separation or divorce. Separation and divorce tend to be negative life events. Dividing things into 'yours' and 'mine' tends to put parents in a certain combative mood. Add to that the hurt due to promises broken and joint hopes dashed as well as the financial fallout and problem of having to start over in your middle years of life and it is hard to see how parents can draw anything positive from the experience. However it is essential to deal with children issues in a very different manner.

Solicitors are now obliged by law to advise all clients on the advisability of resolving any dispute concerning the rearing of a child in a co-operative manner either through Mediation, or by sorting out an agreement through the solicitors acting for each side. If for whatever reason therefore you do not engage directly with the other parent through the Mediation process, it is still possible and advisable to reach agreement through negotiation by your solicitor. The way in which you separate can have consequences for yourselves and your children.

3. APPLY TO COURT TO MAKE AN ORDER

Where parents cannot agree then of course the Court can make an order deciding where and when and how children are to be raised. The law makes a distinction between "custody" "access" and "guardianship". Custody is the day to day care and control of the child. Access is the right to have some level of regular contact with the child. It is also the right of the child to have ongoing contact with the absent parent. Guardianship is the right to be consulted and have input into the big decisions such as the health, education and general welfare of the child. Married parents always retain guardianship rights even after separation or divorce. Unmarried fathers, who have guardianship rights either by agreement or by order of court, can only lose these rights if removed by order of court.

The Court can award custody to one spouse, with separate access rights to the parent with whom the child is not living. The Court can also give joint custody to both parents, however if there is continuing conflict or if parents cannot work sensibly in the interests of the child an order for joint custody is unlikely to be made. When an application is made to court for joint custody, sole custody, or for a determination as to what access is to be put in place the Court will make the decision on the basis of the 'best interests of the child' and this will be the Court's guiding rule – rather than what either parent wants.

Going to Court should be a last resort however. The Judge rather than the parents then decide on parenting matters. The Court Order is binding on all parties and can be enforced as a Court Order.

If you are the custodial parent you have an obligation to facilitate the child's contact with the other parent. If you are the non-custodial parent stick to the agreed times and days of your access. Try not to disappoint your children! They are the ones who will be hurt by broken promises. Where the Court has made an Order each parent should obey that order. To disobey a Court Order has serious legal consequences.

A child is a minor until age 18 but a child is financially dependent until 23 years of age if in full time education.

REMEMBER GOING
TO COURT SHOULD
BE A LAST RESORT
NOT A FIRST
OPTION



MULLINS & TREACY

SOLICITORS, MEDIATORS & NOTARIES

CLIENT FOCUSED - RESULTS DRIVEN

T: 051 391 488 051 640 352

F: 051 391 489

W: www.mullinstreacy.ie

Email: reception@mullinstreacy.ie

Family Law and Civil Legal Aid Committee, Law Society of Ireland, Blackhall Place, Dublin 7.