It should be no surprise that an important key to ensuring your children's well-being through this transition is communication. However, too much or too little too communication can be problematic. Recall previously that we recommend that parents together have the initial conversation about separating with their children. Both parents should be available whenever children feel the need to discuss their feelings. Depending on your child's age, you might hear the same questions over and over again. It is important that you remain patient and know that your child is looking to you for stability. Your answers should be consistent, although you are not expected to know the answers to every question; it is certainly okay to let your children know that. Try to refrain from speaking with your children regarding the practical aspects of their living situation when you are very upset. They need to feel secure in the knowledge that they will be safe, so their questions on these topics are best addressed when you can focus on their needs and provide the reassurance they're seeking.

Another common trap for parents is over-explaining. It's easy to believe that children should have complete knowledge of every aspect of the parents' relationship, so frequently, parents who are hurt or who oppose the separation will begin a habit of over-explaining. In general, you should keep explanations to your small children (between 2 and 5 years old) relatively brief. As above, a child's primary need at this stage is reassurance. They need to know that their immediate needs will be met and that both parents love them. At the same time, remember that children are very resilient and can adapt to many changes; children are often more adaptable than adults. Do not assume that your difficulty in adjusting will necessarily mean your child will have the same difficulty.

Older children (between 6 and 10 years old) tend to ask the same questions over and over again. Depending on the child, you might be very surprised at the level of sophistication in their concerns. Reassurance at this stage is also very important. In addition to the care and concern of both parents, let children know about the areas of life that will remain stable. Your child will be looking to you for cues about how to feel about the situation. It is perfectly appropriate for your children to see you emotional, but they should also experience you communicating in a calm and rational manner. They will learn it is acceptable to have emotions and express feelings appropriately. How parents treat one another is what most adversely affect kids.

Pre-teens and adolescents also need a certain amount of assurance. Although they will likely say that everything is 'fine,' they will also appreciate the reassurance their parents will be involved in their lives and that certain routines and living situations will remain stable. Pre-teens are more attuned than younger children to relationships, so your respect and consideration for the other parent will be very visible. They are also more attuned to subtle gestures like rolling of the eyes, tone of voice, and overall attitude, so be mindful of these as you communicate with your co-parent.

One positive way to communicate with children of all ages is by spending time with them. Making time for each of your children every day (and individually if possible) will speak volumes about what is important to you. Rarely has a parent regretted spending too much time with their children, getting down to their level, and experiencing life with them.

Should I Cry in Front of My Children?

You should not be afraid to show emotions around your children. Seeing you work through your emotions will let them know that having difficult feelings and expressing pain are not negative things. You will be teaching them to respect their emotions and to express them in appropriate ways. Parents often feel ashamed when children are there to comfort them. In moderation, this is certainly not harmful for your child, and it can also be quite empowering. The thing to remember is that if you are overwhelmed with emotions on a regular basis, you need to find other outlets for them away from your children. You will want the times you react rationally and logically around your children to outweigh the times you react emotionally.

Understanding my Responsibility to my Children's Emotional Reactions?

Expect that your children will have emotional responses. These are opportunities for you to validate sad, angry, or anxious feelings. Listen for the emotion behind what your child is saying and respond to the emotion, rather than the content. For example, if your child is expressing reluctance to sleep in a new home, you can say: 'It sounds like you are nervous about staying in the new home tonight.' Letting them respond gives them an opportunity to talk about the feeling of nervousness. At this point, whatever they say should be followed up with a question like: 'What specifically makes you nervous?' 'What does that feel like?' In addition to allowing them to talk about these feelings, you will be gathering information about how to provide some reassurance.

Avoid negating these feelings or saying anything like they are being silly, stupid, babyish, or any other put-down. Each of these forms of dismissal tells your child that his or her feelings are not okay. On the other hand, asking questions about the feelings and giving permission for those feelings to exist will teach your child a great deal about exploring emotions and expressing them constructively.

Normal Reactions to Parent's Separation

The following reactions are normal for children after finding out their parents are separating.

- Your kids may express anger and resentment with you and your co-parent for upsetting their sense of normalcy.
- They may appear extremely anxious having to face this big change in their life.
- Depression and sadness about the family's new situation is normal. A. sense of hopelessness and helplessness could form into a mild form of depression.

It will take some time for your kids to work through their issues but you should see gradual improvement over time.

How to Balance What my Children Want and What is Best for Them?

The key here is balance. Be on the lookout for times when you can offer your child choices. This habit will empower them and show them their ideas and opinions count. At the same time, you don't have to feel like all decisions have to be approved by the children. Get used to the idea that you will be making decisions for your children that they will not like or agree with. This is a good thing. Although children may express some negative feelings about some of your decisions, they will ultimately feel a sense of security that you are making such decisions and taking control. Don't be afraid of your child's emotional reactions; make room for them, discuss them, and they will pass.

Remember to tell your children verbally that you love them. They should also experience this love through your words and your actions. Stay involved with what is important to them, including their hobbies and extracurricular activities. Let them know that friends who are important to them are also important to you. Open communication should be encouraged but not forced. Your children should feel that even when you have a disagreement with them, you are interested in their opinions and perspectives. You can validate your child's opinion without agreeing with it. Fourteen-year-old daughter: 'Daddy, I want to stay up until eleven o'clock tonight; there is a movie I want to watch.' Parent: 'I understand that you really want to see this movie and it is important to you. But tonight is a school night, and your bedtime is ten p.m.' Even though your child might be angry with your decision and may disagree with it, you are letting them know that you understand their perspective, and this will be validating even though they are not getting their way.

Overwhelmingly, a major challenge parents face is the temptation to slack off discipline and to provide their child whatever material things they ask for. This is common enough for parents who are married, but even more common among those who aren't together anymore. Many such parents feel their children have suffered so much already and therefore should get whatever they ask for. This is a big mistake. It's difficult to resist the urge to give in to guilt; however, the only thing children learn by always getting what they want is that they can manipulate people. Far too many parents wish they had never begun giving in to their children's every whim.

A related issue arises when you are making good choices for your kids, but your co-parent is spoiling them by giving them everything they want and not enforcing discipline or structure. This is an unfortunate circumstance, but there is usually little you can do about it. If you are lucky enough to have a relationship with your co-parent where you give and receive feedback from one another, then by all means you can point out areas for improvement. More likely, however, is a situation where parents will not feel comfortable

giving and taking such advice. You should go on enforcing rules, structure, and a respectful, safe atmosphere in your home and hope your co-parent realizes that a lack of structure and spoiling are very destructive. By now you should be expecting the next five words: **keep doing the right thing.**

Positive Traits Children Develop Through a Healthy Co-parenting Experience

- Ability to deal with change: Children with parents that are co-parenting often learn to adapt to changing circumstances more quickly than other children. This often reinforces a sense of inner strength and resilience.
- Skill in expressing feelings: Children often have to deal with a wide range of emotions when their parents are co-parenting. This can facilitate recognition of different feelings and ways to express them that are healthy.
- Greater sense of independence: Children being co-parented often become more responsible for themselves and their siblings at an earlier age.
- Willingness to seek help: Children being co-parented may have a more realistic sense of their abilities and weaknesses and may be more willing to seek assistance when needed.
- Openness to diversity: Children being co-parented are often exposed to a wider range of diversity and lifestyles. This exposure can be beneficial in a variety of ways and contribute to long-term adjustment in many of life's challenging situations.

How Should we Handle Issues That Arise Around Visitation?

If your child complains, becomes sad, or throws a tantrum every time they are to visit the other parent, it is important that you see this reaction for what it is. Children will often have such reactions in front of you because they feel it is the response you want to see from them. Frequently, when they are with the other parent, they are fine and thriving. It is important to be firm about the importance of visiting and spending time with the other parent. Your children might see you as the 'enemy' by forcing them to go, but it is the right thing to do. The rare exception would be if you had a genuine belief that your child would be abused or neglected by the other parent or another person in the other parent's household. In these situations, it is your responsibility to ensure your child's safety. Otherwise, you should calmly and unemotionally let your children know that visitation with the other parent is mandatory. This becomes more challenging with teenagers who feel they are old enough to make their own decisions regarding visitation.

If you are the parent your child is reluctant to visit, your challenge will be different. First off, show some understanding for your co-parent who is dealing with a child who says they do not want to visit you. Also, recognize that your child is probably responding more to a stressful situation and less to who you are as a parent. If your child is saying they do not want to visit or spend time with you, you might need to ask yourself some uncomfortable questions: How are we spending our visitation time? Am I available to my children during visitation? Am I taking time to listen to them and participate in their lives? Do I look forward to visitation and the time that I spend with my children? If after taking an honest inventory of yourself as a parent, you feel you are providing a very safe, structured, and loving, environment, then you should assume that your child is reacting to the situation and not take personally their reluctance to visit with you. You might have to make some short-term

accommodations to their wishes while letting them know that visitation with you is required. The key here is not to get caught up in your child's emotional response, but to deal with them and your co-parent with reason, flexibility, and loving concern.

When your child returns from a visit with Mom or Dad, do not grill them for information. It's helpful to demonstrate a healthy sense of curiosity about the time they spend together, but do not ask interrogating questions. You should be excited for them if they are excited about the time they spent, and be available to listen when there are issues that arise. If your child expresses some concerns about something that occurred during a visit, you should let them know that you will discuss the issue with the other parent at the appropriate time. When engaging your co-parent regarding a problem during visitation, avoid blaming or attacking the other parent. Instead, hear their telling of the incident by asking curious, non-blaming questions. Remember that there are two sides to every story, and continually siding with your child against the other parent will merely foster angry and resentful feelings.

Checklist for Helpful Parental Behaviors and Healthy Communication:

- Am I fostering open communication with my children?
- Am I supporting my child's relationship with both parents?
- Am I communicating with my child in age-appropriate ways?
- Am I refraining from:
  – Using my children to communicate with the other parent?

  – Getting caught up in my child's emotional response?

  – Grilling them when they return from visitation?

  – Spoiling children and letting them always get their way?

- Am I encouraging my child's hobbies, interests, and routines?
- Am I supporting communication but not forcing it?
- Am I providing consistent discipline and consequences for inappropriate behavior?
- Do I make room for the other parent's parenting style even if I disagree with it sometimes?
- Am I seeking assistance for problems that have become unmanageable?

How to Develop Empathy and Positive Communication.

Empathy is the ability to see things from another's perspective and feel their emotions. Putting yourself in another person's shoes might lead you to act with compassion and do what you can to improve their situation. In doing so, you can reduce the other person's

distress as well as your own. Maybe you can't solve their problem, but you can understand that they need to vent their emotions.

Empathy isn't just about hardships. When your child is excited about something, you feel their joy. When your friend is laughing at a joke, you experience their amusement. Empathy allows you to deepen your relationships as you connect with friends' and loved ones' thoughts and feelings, and they connect with yours.

Two Components of Empathy: Affective and Cognitive.

Affective (or emotional) empathy is the ability to feel what others are feeling. If your child is stressed and sad, you might mirror those emotions. If a friend is happy and upbeat, you might find yourself grinning as their happiness seems contagious.

Cognitive empathy is the ability to recognize and understand another person's mental state. It gives you insight into the other person's perspective and emotions. If you recognize that your friend is angry, you can predict that your joke isn't going to land well. If you can tell that your friend is feeling helpless, you won't be surprised by their sudden outburst.

Empathy can also:

Motivate prosocial behavior. Empathy can motivate you to take actions that improve the lives of others. These actions might include anything from donating to a charity or to simply comforting someone with a hug.

Guide decision-making. In social situations, empathy can help you decide on the wisest course of action. If your child seems stressed out from school, you can infer that it's not the best time to ask them to take on more responsibilities.

Help diffuse conflict. If you're in a bitter argument with your co-parent, for example, empathizing with them can prevent you from being overly critical or needlessly cruel. Once you have a better understanding of someone else's perspective, it's easier to move on to proposing a compromise.

Building Empathy

Improving your listening skills– Identify and remove barriers to listening such as your phone or trying to multi-task during your conversation. Don't interrupt and use non-verbal cues, such as maintaining eye contact or a head nod to let them know you hear them.

Learn to read body language- People also convey information about their emotional state through nonverbal body cues such as facial expressions, eye contact, as well as their voice, posture, and hand gestures.

Embrace your vulnerability- Speak up and say what you need or feel. The more you talk about your emotions, the more comfortable it will be.

Improve your emotional intelligence- Emotional intelligence is often defined by four attributes: self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship management. Improving *self-management* is done by practicing relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing, to help you stay calm in the moment. Heightening *self-awareness* is done with mindfulness practices such as focusing on the present moment but withholding judgment. Increase *social awareness*by focusing on other people. Aim to be present with whoever you're interacting with. Use conflict resolution skills to enhance *relationship management*. Knowing how to pick your battles, compromise, and practice forgiveness can help you navigate these inevitable conflicts.

Case Study

Remy (53) and Jesse (55) were a high-powered and strong-willed couple who decided to divorce after 20+ years of marriage. Like many couples, they were living in misery for many years before deciding to make the decision. Part of the chronic problems had to do with the fact that they were both aware that a divorce would be a challenge due to dividing assets and property in a way that would be fair. They both believed that the other one would try to take advantage financially. In addition, this couple was also raising four teenage children who are having their own challenges.

Over the course of their lifetimes, the couple had generated significant wealth and assets. These are always a bone of contention in divorce proceedings and can really confuse matters. Unfortunately, remaining distracted solely on financial issues, will prevent other pressing concerns from being addressed.

Also, most people fail to consider how older children are affected by divorce, and the couple's teenaged children seemed to be agonized by the entire affair. With all the conversations between family members being focused around money, difficult conversations having to do with the various transitions of lifestyle changes regarding the kids weren't happening.

This is a common, yet challenging situation, as families stuck in money talk won't quickly shift their priorities elsewhere. My only option starting off was to join them in the endless dead-end talks around money. Once they trusted I understood the importance of these issues to them, the couple seemed open to expanding the conversation beyond money. I discovered this couple was placing their fears into the future by focusing on money when the real issue was how the divorce was affecting their children in the here and now.

A significant turning point happened when I asked them what in therapy circles is known as "The miracle question." The miracle question is a wonderful tool and a powerful question when posed to people who are locked in the same old struggles. "Imagine that when you go to sleep a miracle were to happen and magically solve the issues around money that you are now facing. What would be different the first thing in the morning when you awake?" This type of question tends to stop clients in their tracks because you are asking them to imagine something that they haven't thought about. Remy said that if the money issues between them were resolved, more focus would be on planning activities with the children. The thought of the lack of quality of time with them was something that was very troubling. Jesse said that taking night classes for a real estate license would be very helpful. When this couple was finally able to begin imagining life without the money battle, they could envision some positive changes in their lives. Now, unlike most couples locked in such a struggle, they can see the finish line.

In future sessions, we usually spent the first few minutes with talk about money dominating the conversation. However, they would take turns reminding one another that there were other important issues to deal with. I could see them grow into a partnership they needed to have in order to manage the years ahead.

In our last session, the theme was security and both Remy and Jesse felt empowered to now realize that there were different types of security, not just financial security. They were able to articulate the importance of emotional security, psychological security, and the security that two parents can work together and raise happy children.

When they were able to set the money issue aside, they could focus on the practicalities of raising their children before they headed off to college. Once they had started to engage in this kind of discussion, they were also able to work out financial arrangements that kept them and their children secure as they had both originally intended.