



## Adolescents and Separation and Divorce

Canadian divorce statistics suggest a rate of a 40% marriage breakdown, many of these families with children entering or in their difficult adolescent years. While each stage of child development offers up a specific set of challenges, it could probably be asserted that adolescence presents a number of dangerous challenges that could have disturbing outcomes for a lifetime.

Many teens believe that they have an understanding of why their parents separated and who is responsible for the about to happen disarray in their life. At this moment in time they may have stronger attachment to one parent and with that parent comes a loyalty. In many instances they have observed a withdrawal from family life by one of their parents. They often see that parent as the 'irresponsible' parent.

Family Law promotes the concept of no-fault divorce but in truth it is only a concept for legislators, judges and lawyers; it has little meaning for a 12 year old girl entering adolescence or a 15 year old boy struggling with the risky choices before him.

As a father of three grown children and a 30-year veteran of secondary school teaching and coaching, I have witnessed the changing landscape facing adolescents. Consider just a few; making a decision to drink alcohol at age of 12 or younger; availability of a range of dangerous drugs (including cocaine) in secondary schools; a party culture that exists for many teens; adolescents raised in single parent homes where that parent has to work long and often odd hours to pay the bills; it goes on and on.

Separation during adolescence complicates all the challenges. Research tells us that separating mothers (4x) and separating dads (6x) suffer rates of depression much higher than intact family parents. Why wouldn't the depth of pain of their parents damage an adolescent; why wouldn't they suffer a similar consequence? The family breakdown challenges all of their closest relationships (grandparents, extended family, closest friends).

Adolescence is a critical period, in part because of the nature of the different development tasks that an adolescent begins at 13 or earlier (Senior Public School); i.e. the path to leaving home after secondary school; ongoing moral development; romantic relationships; responsible decision making; plans for their post adolescent life; etc. The way the family separation plays out impacts on whether the outcomes will be positive (growth) or negative (delayed growth) for these children.

Some adolescents react with anger and embarrassment at the loss of their family, as they know it. Many face the additional challenge of accelerated responsibility as a caregiver to younger siblings or even to one or both of their parents; some may be subject to a full range of difficult emotions, such as despair, loss and abandonment; some become subject to financial restraints to their lifestyle or must accept obtaining their daily meals at the Food Bank with one of their parents.

Our experience at Kid & Dad Shared Support suggests that this developmental stage has a particularly unique and potentially dangerous outcome. Because of their age (12+) our legal system gives significant weight to the child in determining their availability to one parent or the other. It is clearly not the best

outcome for the child, except in the most egregious circumstances. Unfortunately the approved parent may view the outcome as a positive and has little interest in advocating for the other parent. In fact some parents create conditions that contribute to separateness or alienation with the child's other parent. This is identified as Hostile Aggressive Parenting or at its most extreme Parent Alienation Syndrome.

This separateness often results in one parent removed from the life of their child, potentially for a lifetime. It is the most devastating outcome for that parent and that child. i.e. a future without the love and support of that loving relationship.

One of the dangerous outcomes of the parents' failure to cooperatively parent occurs when parents forfeit parenting control to their adolescent. The parents' failure to communicate and set similar standards leads to their teen setting curfew hours, becoming a free agent within the family and outside the home. Each parent feels that they are going to lose their child to the other parent. These teens often learn to play one parent against the other and may go back and forth, home to home, based on inducements rather than what is best for them.

The following are suggestions for parents of adolescent children coping with becoming a separating family.

1. Arrive at a common no-fault explanation for the separation. Talk to your teens about the reasons for separating in no-fault language. Keep any ongoing talks about the separation within that framework.
2. Both parents need to encourage a strong relationship with the other parent. It is all right to love both their mom and dad, even when the parents' love for each other has changed. Start regular parenting access immediately!
3. Allow your adolescent child to be part of the conversation on the custody and parenting agreement, while retaining final control. With an adolescent's schedule both parents need to be flexible but committed to the two, involved parents rule.
4. Remember that you are the parent and your children need you to be an adult not only as their parent but also as an adult role model.
5. Both parents need to stay involved with the school. Behavior difficulties often show up first at school. Too many parents avoid getting involved and later find danger signs were available and missed e.g. when their children are regularly late or truant. Alert your child's guidance counselor, key teachers and coaches re: the changes in your family.
6. Please recognize when things are going badly and don't fear reaching for help. Step back and see whether your child is losing their relationship with one of their parents. Has your child become increasingly negative toward you or the other parent? These are high-risk signals. The reason for it may be varied but none are acceptable. Each parent has a responsibility to their child to be proactive and take the necessary steps to change the current direction. Do it for your child if not for your former partner.

Every time an adolescent is without an involved parent there has been a breakdown that cannot be allowed to stand. As our adolescent children strive to become responsible young adults, parents from those separating families need help as they transition into a new family form.

Our community has the resources to make a positive difference for separated families. It can do so by taking advantage of the love that each parent has for his or her child and help each family build a cooperative, parenting relationship for their child's sake.

*Kids 'n' Dad* services families in the Waterloo Region. Its goal is to ensure that children from a separated family have two parents co-operating and actively supporting them as they develop and mature into adulthood.

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