

# Separation



Separation or divorce does not normally end your involvement and responsibility as a parent. Children need the continuing affection and support of both

parents. This will require cooperation with your former partner which may not always be easy.

The pain of a separation can be felt in many ways. You may feel lonely, desperate, depressed or grief-stricken; you may feel a failure and lose your self-confidence; you may feel angry, jealous or guilty. Mixed up with all these emotions, you might also feel a sense of relief.

All of these feelings are normal responses to a separation. You should not be alarmed by the fact that you experience them and you should not expect to cope with everything immediately. On the other hand, if you nurse feelings such as jealousy, anger or despair for too long, they may take over and prevent you from once again leading a fulfilling life. They may also get in the way of your children's

adjustment. There are many ways of coping with a separation but they can be broadly described as falling into two basic categories. One reaction is to get stuck in self-

pity, living in the past, continuing the bitterness, putting the children in the middle of your conflict and turning the children against their other parent. This type of reaction always means increased difficulties for everyone, particularly the children.

The other reaction is where you try to make the best of the situation and learn through your experience. Choosing this direction gives you the chance to rebuild your life, regain your self-confidence, find new and satisfying goals and take a positive view of life again.

The way you handle the separation very much affects how your children cope with it. During this time of great difficulty you may find some of the following suggestions helpful for you and your children.

## What happens for children when their parents separate?

Children can react very differently to separation or divorce. The way they react depends on a number of things, but two important factors are the age of the child and the degree of conflict and animosity between the parents.

There is no doubt this is a stressful period for children, but most recover and end up leading normal healthy lives. Children from separated families can develop and flourish just as well as other children. Their adjustment is enhanced when parents remain sensitive to the children's needs.

Separation is often a surprise for children and they generally experience many of the same feelings as adults. Children can also grieve for quite a long time. They may be unaware of the problems their parents were having and they may feel shocked and confused when the separation occurs. They are also likely to feel insecure and worry whether the remaining parent will leave them as well.

Some children may feel that they must have been to blame. Others may feel very angry with either or both of their parents and want to blame one of them.

Sometimes children become unsure about whether they can still love the parent who left, and they can wonder what is happening to the absent parent. Although parents are often upset and confused themselves at this time, it is important to try to understand what your children are going through and to consider their feelings as well.

Remember, it can be far less harmful for a child to go through family breakdown than to go on living in an unhappy family where there is extreme tension and fighting in the home.

## How do they behave?

Children do not always communicate with words. Their responses to their parents' separation may be expressed in behaviour.

Some children become very withdrawn and avoid talking about the separation or the absent parent. Others (particularly if they are younger) may become very 'clingy' and not want to let the parent they are with out of their sight. These children feel they have 'lost' the departing parent and are determined not to lose their remaining parent.

Others may 'regress' in their behaviour – they may act younger than they did before the separation, talk in baby talk or fall back in their toilet training. Some may have nightmares, others may become rebellious, difficult to handle or aggressive with other children and even their parents. These are some of the ways your children might show their distress. This is their signal that they need your special attention. With time, most of these behavioural problems disappear. However, if they persist over a long period it is best to seek some help.

# What happens to children at different ages when parents separate?

## Birth – 2 years

Children in this age group are highly dependent on their parents.

If one parent has taken on primary responsibility for care of a child it is almost certain that a strong physical and emotional dependence will develop between them. Lengthy separation from this parent can be a source of intense emotional distress.

A child at this age has a very different concept of time than does an adult. For very young children a few hours will often seem to be a very long time and this needs to be considered when making parenting arrangements.

In this age group, children are likely to fret for the absent parent with whom they need frequent, short periods of contact to continue their relationship.

A high level of conflict between the parents can make visits extremely stressful for a child of this age. For this very young group, it can be helpful if parents stick to a routine and, where possible, provide reminders of the other parent such as photos. It may also be useful if some special toy or blanket travels with them between households.

## 2<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> – 5 years

Children in this age group begin to be a little more independent of their parents. Separation can be a major crisis for these children and they can react with shock or depression. For instance, children in this group may show their distress by a change in sleeping habits, toilet habits or a deterioration in language skills.

In this age group also, children differ from adults in how they perceive time. They have less time distortion than do infants, but still experience a short period as being a much longer time than it is for an adult.

Pre-school children

understand the world through very different thought processes than older children. They often fantasise about what they don't understand and are likely to make up things from bits of their own experience. They are also often confused by time and days. A calendar showing when they will be with either parent may be helpful. They are sensitive to criticism about either parent and may perceive this as criticism of themselves.



## 5 – 8 years

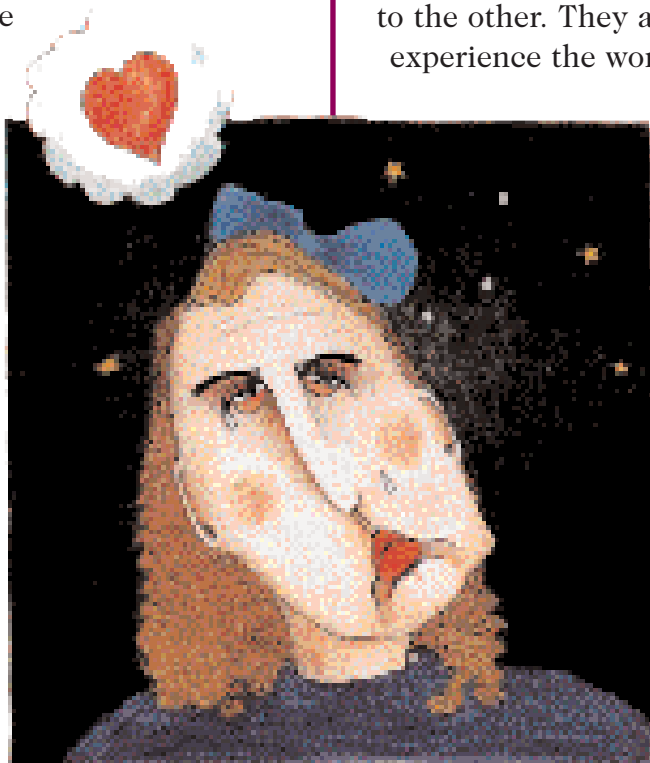
Children in this age group are beginning to be able to talk about their feelings.

They often have an intense wish to restore their parents' relationship and say and do things they hope will bring this about. They often want to stay at home to be near the parent with whom they spend most of their time.

Similarly, they may feel reluctant to leave the other parent at the end of a visit and may exhibit behavioural problems which are noticed by friends, teachers and parents. Children in this age group can have difficulty expressing their worries and tend to demonstrate them through their behaviour which can be difficult to understand.

It may be helpful if both of you, or adult friends or relations, invite children of this age to express their emotions about the separation, particularly of their desire to get their parents back together.

You should discourage children from taking responsibility for making arrangements about contact.



## 8 – 12 years

Children in this age group are able to speak about their feelings. They experience a conflict of loyalty between each parent and, if the conflict between parents is high, they may try to cope by rejecting one parent or trying to keep both happy by saying negative things about one to the other. They are also beginning to experience the world outside their

family. They have sporting and other interests and social commitments. When you make parenting arrangements you should take account of your children's interests and activities. This allows them the opportunity to join in the social and sporting activities which are an important part of their development.

Where possible, it would be beneficial for children to continue their activities regardless of who is caring for them.

## 12 – 16 years

In some respects adolescents are increasingly independent of their parents, even when parents are not separated. They need to be given time and space to work out their own reactions to their parents' separation. If pressured by either parent, adolescents are likely to react with anger and rejection.

They particularly need flexibility in arrangements to allow them to participate in normal adolescent social activities and school events.

# What is the effect of continuing disagreement over children?

Children are very sensitive to conflict between their parents. While disagreement is normal in any family, a continuation of conflict makes life very difficult for children. In fact, research shows that this is one of the critical factors affecting children's adjustment after separation or divorce.

It is hard for children to enjoy both parents when they continue fighting after they have separated, particularly if they put the children in the middle of the

conflict. Eventually, because of the stress this causes them, children may become anxious or distressed before and after staying with or visiting the other parent, or they may start having problems at school.

Children's development can be seriously hampered by exposure to hostility and violence. Overhearing or witnessing intense conflict is harmful and places them at risk of long-term emotional and behavioural problems.

## How parents can make things difficult for children following separation

When children are growing up their parents, or in some cultures members of their extended family, are the most important and powerful people in their lives. It is very easy after separation for these adults to sometimes misuse their power because they feel so hurt and angry about what has happened.

Most parents sincerely love and care about their children. But in times of intense conflict in a relationship children can become weapons against the other parent. Unfortunately, these parents do not realise the harm this is doing to their children.

Sometimes parents may be quite unaware of the more subtle things they do which affect the way their children feel about each of them. These things include putting the children in a position

where they feel they have to protect their parents from hurt or choose between the people they love most.

Sometimes, instead of providing support for their children, parents expect their children to look after them and keep them happy rather than the other way round.

Separation and divorce can be extremely traumatic for children – they can see the dramatic changes in their world as a loss of care and stability.

For children up to five years old, family breakdown can be difficult to understand and the child is especially vulnerable at this age.

Older children can experience a time of confusion and uncertainty even though they are more able to understand what is happening to the family.

## Ways you can help your children

- When you begin to accept the separation then your children will be able to do the same – it is important that you get on with your life and not dwell in the past or hang on to any anger or bitterness.
- Ensure your children know you both still love them and that this will always be the case.
- Don't criticise the other parent in front of the children.
- Be positive about the other parent when talking to your children.
- Give your children the clear message that it is good for them to have an ongoing relationship with both of you.
- Let your children know that even though separating is upsetting, you are handling it and expect things to improve.
- Be aware that children often tell you what they think you want to hear and sometimes what they say should not be taken too literally. A young boy who says, when questioned about his time with his father: "I don't like the food my daddy gives me to eat", may just want to reassure his mother that he likes living with her.
- Talk to the other parent about your children and their interests.
- Talk to your children's teachers.
- Give your children the time to think about and express their own feelings about the other parent, even if those feelings are not the same as yours.
- Avoid conflict in front of your children.
- Keep your children out of your arguments. Avoid asking them to give messages to the other parent.
- Turn to other adults for emotional support rather than your children.
- Help your children to discuss their feelings about the separation.
- Reassure children that they are not to blame – sometimes when parents

are fighting some of the anger is directed toward the children who may then mistakenly believe that it was because they were bad or troublesome that led to their parent's separation.

## Making decisions

Sometimes parents feel that it is best for children to make up their own minds about where they want to live. Young children are not usually ready for this responsibility as they are not generally mature enough to make this important decision. Having to make such a decision places a heavy burden on them and having to choose between their parents can lead them to feel guilty about the parent they have not chosen.

Usually the best decisions about where and how the children live are those made together by the parents. However, parents should consider the feelings of their children and be willing to listen to them. Children should not be required to express a view when to do so would mean reprisal from a disappointed parent.

Parents normally know their children's needs and are usually in a better position than anyone else to make decisions about their children's future. If parents are unable to make these decisions themselves because of conflict, family and child mediators and counsellors can help them to negotiate with each other. Mediators and counsellors can be contacted through the Family Court of Australia Mediation Service and through groups such as Relationships Australia, Centacare and Anglicare. They may assist parents who wish their children to be involved in decisions and they can help parents assess the needs of their children. If an agreement is still not possible at the talks, it then becomes necessary for the Family Court judges to make a decision.

## Suggestions about making arrangements for your children



- In the early stages of separation children don't need to know details about why their parents have separated, but they do need to know where they are going to live, what school they are going to attend and when they are going to be with each parent. Some parents 'forget' to mention the arrangements to their children because they feel anxious about them. Even if you have some doubts about the arrangements, give them a fair go – this is the best way to start on reasonable terms with your former partner. Changes can always be made later if things aren't working.

- You will probably need to adjust the arrangements from time to time according to each

child's age, health and interests. There may be occasions when you need to change an arranged time. You should always discuss with the other parent any new arrangements. If this proves difficult, an independent family and child mediator or counsellor may be able to help you both. You may wish to set out your arrangements in a Parenting Plan, which is available as a do-it-yourself kit from the Family Court, or seek 'consent orders' from the Court. The Family Court can give you information about the ways in which you can formalise your arrangements without going before a judge.

- One of the most difficult times is when a parent arrives to pick up or to drop off a child. Children are aware of the tension between their parents; they have already suffered the shock of one parent's departure and may feel very insecure about further conflict or tension. As well as advance notice, parents need to give children the feeling that they are in control and know what is happening.
- Keep to your arrangements and inform the other parent if you are unable to do so. Children can easily feel rejected by your unexplained failure to arrive at the expected time.
- Contact visits should be pleasant, not only for the children but for both parents. They should help children maintain a positive relationship with a parent who is no longer living with them. A breakdown of this relationship can add to the grief experienced by children. Don't attempt to discuss contentious issues at handover time or while the children are present.
- It is possible that one or both parents will find other partners at some point. This can sometimes be a difficult time for everybody. Parents should feel free to introduce the children to their new partners, but not to be too anxious for the children to approve of or like this person. Take a very gradual approach. Because adjustment to new people can be stressful for the children, the relationship should be well established before children are deeply involved with a new partner.
- Children need time to adjust – they should not be forced to adjust to changes too quickly. On the other

hand, they should not be encouraged to dictate the terms on which they will see or spend time with their other parent.

- After time with the other parent, especially in the early stages, children may show distress of some kind, be irritable or withdrawn or generally behave differently when they return. The fact that they are upset does not mean they have had a bad time. Children often retain the hope that their parents will get back together and spending time with the other parent, while enjoyable in itself, can remind them that their wishes for the family to get back together are not being fulfilled. They may feel sad about having to leave one parent and go to the other even if they love both.
- Children may sometimes show distress in one form or other upon returning from seeing or staying with the other parent. The distress is usually real and a calm, sympathetic response will go along way towards helping children work out their own way of coping with their parents' separation.
- It is generally better not to move children between households too close to their bed time. Nor is it wise to start an activity or outing immediately they arrive or return. Allow children time to settle in.
- Visits should never be used as a way of parents checking on each other. Children need to be able to go between both households without being questioned about what is happening in the other. Children may want to talk about their other

parent but they should never be 'pumped' for information. They should be able to feel that the love they get from each parent is unconditional and not dependent on giving right or wrong answers to one parent about the other. Children do not always fully understand why their parents needed to separate and quizzing them for information can make them feel stressed and insecure in their relationships with both parents.

- Parents do not need to provide the children with a duplicate environment with regard to discipline, rules of behaviour, etc. On the other hand, just as when both parents live together, it's important to reach broad agreement on matters of discipline so that one parent does not undermine the other's efforts. It is not uncommon even in unseparated families for there to be disagreements between parents about what is good or safe for children or other child rearing issues. Compromises on these issues frequently have to be reached. Compromise can cause anxiety for one or both parents. Give things time to settle before trying to re-negotiate further changes.
- The attitudes and actions of separated parents who remain in contact through their children have a lot to do with how their children will cope with the separation and the extent to which their needs can be met. Children should not be used as the go-between.

## What is the Court's view on parenting arrangements?

- The Court encourages parents to make arrangements that meet the needs of the children and family.
- The Court encourages families to make their own decisions and offers a range of mediation services to help them do so.
- Contact with family members is considered to be the right of a child (not the right of a parent).
- Where children express a view and are of sufficient maturity, their views should be considered by parents. There is no set age for this as all children and families are different.
- The Court usually considers that it is in the child's best interest to maintain contact with both parents.
- Denial of contact with the other parent may have serious consequences for the child's development.
- Children need to be safe and protected from harm and the Court will make decisions based on a child's unique circumstances.

For agreements such as Parenting Plans to work, parental cooperation is essential.

Without this cooperation, parenting is bound to become difficult and cause problems for both you and your children.

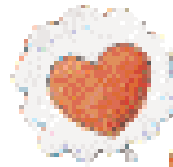
As parents, you are in the best position to make decisions about your children because you know them so well. Older children usually like to play a part in the decision-making as well, so it is important to listen carefully to them when they express opinions or feelings about parenting arrangements. Family and child mediators and counsellors may be able to help you and your children discuss their needs.

When parents cannot agree, the Court will make the arrangements considered to best meet the needs of the children. Judges consider carefully the circumstances of your family before making final decisions and then it is up to both parents to follow the orders made.

An important point to remember is that most children love both parents and although they may have many feelings about the separation, in most cases they miss their parents and want to keep in contact with them.

## Guidelines for parents

- Give yourself, your children and your former partner time to readjust.
- Try to strike a reasonable balance between time for yourself and time for your children.
- Don't feel you must over-compensate for the loss your children have suffered by giving them expensive holidays, outings, presents, etc. The best thing you can give your children at this stage is your time and yourself. Over-compensating with presents and outings is usually the result of you feeling guilty and will not help your children.
- Although it may be difficult from a practical point of view, it is better not to upset your children's routine too abruptly.
- Children need stability and having to cope with too many changes at once can be very disturbing for them. Sometimes an abrupt change of environment like moving house or school cannot be avoided and, in these circumstances, it is very important that you allow extra time for yourself and the children to be together.
- Relationship breakdown is always hard on children (as well as parents). But this should not stop you from telling them what is



happening and why, in a way they can easily understand. However, limit the



amount of detail that you tell your children. This will vary with the circumstances and with each child's age and understanding. Be careful you don't tell them things in order to convince them of your point of view. The point of discussing things is to reassure them and keep them informed about what is happening so that they don't worry unnecessarily.

- Remember the better parts of the relationship with your former partner and try to share them with your children.
- If your children are visibly distressed you can help them by assuring them that it's okay to cry. Sometimes they will want to talk as

well as cry; at other times they may simply want to cry.

- Your children may also express a lot of anger. Anger is often an expression of hurt and one way of helping is to encourage them to talk about their feelings of hurt, loss and insecurity.
- Regularly tell your children that they are not to blame for the breakup and that they are not being rejected or abandoned. It is important to understand that children, especially younger ones, often mistakenly feel that something that they have done has caused the breakup. Small children live in a world which is part real and part fantasy, and they can easily believe that some secret wish of theirs may have caused one of their parents to leave.
- Most people going through a separation or divorce find they need a 'lifeline' during the difficult times. If so, make contact with a relationship counselling or mediation organisation, a self-help group or a friend whose opinion you trust. The Family Court can help you make contact with such services. You can also find services for single parents and families listed on the 'Community Help and Welfare Services' page at the front of your phone book; also under 'Marriage' in the White Pages and under 'Counselling – Marriage, Family and Personal' in the Yellow Pages.

- Continuing bitterness and anger between separated parents is likely to damage children much more than the separation itself. To prevent this happening, it may again be helpful to talk about your feelings with someone you trust (preferably outside the family) or with a professional from one of the services mentioned.

- Of course, you may feel angry with your former partner and these feelings may last some time. But remember, it is important for the development of children that they can respect both parents. Discourage your children from taking sides. A child should not be placed in the position of deciding which parent is the 'goodie' and which the 'baddie'.

- Separation or divorce often places financial pressure on both parents. It is important that you discourage your children from blaming the other parent for your financial circumstances.

- After your separation, it is important that you continue to be consistent in your discipline of the children. Children need to know clearly what is expected of them – they feel more secure when reasonable limits are set. Don't confuse allowing the children to express their feelings with allowing them to do whatever they like.

# All children have a need and a right to...

.... Love and be loved by both parents.



.... Be able to enjoy the love of both parents without having excessive demands placed on them by either.

.... Feel proud of both parents and to be able to respect them.

.... See their parents behave towards each other with at least mutual courtesy, consideration and respect.

.... Be listened to by both of their parents so that their needs are met.

# Remember

**1** Contact with both parents is considered to be the right of the child. Continuing contact with a parent not living with the child is an important part of your child's emotional and psychological development. If anything, this contact is even more important when your child is very young. Each of you has a contribution to make to your child which the other parent cannot make up for.

**2** Realise that in spite of your separation you still share common goals for your children. Both of you hope that your children will grow to be mature, well-balanced, secure, happy and successful people. These are goals which you share even though you are separated – the problems which occur on the way to achieving these goals will be your common problems. Your children will benefit greatly if, when problems arise, you are able to cooperate with each other or, at the very least, not use every problem to score points against each other.

**3** Children should be able to feel that both parents are positive about their time with the other parent. The enjoyment and benefits children can receive from seeing their parents will be enhanced if they feel the arrangements have the approval and support of both of you. When collecting or returning your children try, where possible, to spend a few minutes in casual

conversation with each other, perhaps over a cup of coffee. If you cannot do this then at least avoid any outward show of conflict.

**4** Most children desperately want to stay friends with both parents. For many children who want nothing more than to live happily with both parents, visits may remind them that this is not happening. Emotional scenes are therefore quite common at the beginning or end of visits, but they usually happen less often once a regular routine has been established. Try to cooperate with each other to make parenting arrangements as positive and enjoyable as possible and to minimise any stress to your children.

**5** Keeping in regular contact with both parents can help your children deal with the fears, fantasies, and emotional upset caused by the separation. If your children have a good relationship with both of you, they will want to involve both of you in their lives for many years to come. And there may be times when they wish to involve you both in the same event or function, such as parents' days at school, special birthdays, and watching them at sport. It will be easier for your children to maintain a close relationship with you both if you show courtesy and consideration toward each other.

# Things to avoid

Children are usually very loyal and trusting so it is important to look at the ways in which you behave with them to make sure you are not abusing their loyalty and trust. Set out here are some of the subtle ways in which parents can take advantage of their children.

## **'I Spy'**

– asking a child to report on the other parent is destructive – it is using a child for your own ends.

## **'Messenger'**

– using your children as messengers between the two of you teaches children that adults cannot talk honestly or directly to each other.

## **'Your father is a slob' 'Your mother is a fool'**

– anger between parents has a destructive effect on children.

## **'Disneyland daddy' 'Mummy Santa'**

– when visits are used just to give the child a good time, or outings and gifts take the place of normal parenting.

## **'I still love him but he doesn't love me' 'I want to keep the house for the kids but she wants to sell it'**

– this puts pressure on your children to take sides.

## **'You can go if you like ... but we are going on a picnic'**

– don't set up competing activities, it spoils children's pleasure in being with either parent.

# Books for children dealing with separation and divorce

- 'It's Just Different Now'  
Espie, Linda  
Spectrum Publications, Richmond 1999  
- For children aged 3-7 years
- 'Mom's House, Dad's House:  
A Complete Guide for Parents who are  
Separated, Divorced or Remarried'  
Ricci, Isolina  
Fireside Books/Simon & Schuster,  
New York, 1997
- 'Two of Everything'  
Cole, Babette  
Jonathan Cape, London, 1997  
- For children aged 5-12 years
- 'Dad's Place : A Guide for Fathers After Divorce'  
Burrett, Jill  
Angus & Robertson, Sydney NSW 1996
- 'I have Two Dads'  
Wilson, Lorraine  
Illustrated by Chantal Stewart. CIS Cardigan  
Street, Carlton, Victoria 1995  
For children
- 'The Suitcase Kid'  
Wilson, Jacqueline  
Illustrated by Nick Sharatt. Yearling  
Books/Doubleday, London, 1993  
For children
- 'To and Fro Children - A Guide to Successful  
Parenting after Divorce'  
Burrett, Jill  
Allen and Unwin North Sydney 1991
- 'At Daddy's on Saturdays'  
Girard, Linda Walvoorol  
Albert Whitman 1987
- 'Break-up'  
Padoan, G. - Milan, Italy  
Happy Books 1987
- 'Dinosaurs Divorce'  
Brown, L and Brown M  
Little, Brown 1986  
- For children up to 10 years
- 'Jason Goes to Stay with Dad'  
Liddicut, J. - Richmond, Vic  
Ossie Books, 1986
- 'When Jason's Dad Moved Away'  
Liddicut, J. - Richmond, Vic  
Ossie Books, 1986
- 'Daddy Doesn't Live Here Anymore'  
Boesehold, B. - New York  
Western Publishing Co. Inc., 1985
- 'Megan's Book of Divorce'  
Jong, E - London  
Granada, 1985
- 'What Kind of Family is This?'  
Sevling, B - New York  
Western Publishing Co. Inc., 1985
- 'High Pavement Blues'  
Ashley, B. - Harmondsworth & Middlesex  
Puffin Books, 1984
- 'Mom and Dad Don't Live Together Anymore'  
Stinson, Kathy  
Annick Press, 1984
- 'Breaking Up'  
Willkott, F. - London  
William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd, 1983
- 'What am I Doing in a Step-Family?'  
Berman, C. - Melbourne, Vic  
Angus & Robertson, 1983
- 'Bring to a Boil and Separate'  
Hadley Irwin - New York  
Atheneum, 1981
- 'I Have Two Homes'  
Althea - Cambridge  
Dinosaur Publications, Ltd, 1980
- 'My Mom and Dad are Getting a Divorce'  
Bienenfeld, F. - St Paul, MN  
E.M.C. Corp., 1980
- 'So Mum and Dad have Separated'  
Messenger, D.R. - Melbourne, Vic  
Listen and Learn Productions, 1980
- 'Divorce Can Happen to the Nicest People'  
Mayle, P. - Melbourne, Vic  
Sun Books, 1979
- 'Divorce is a Grown Up Problem'  
Sinberg, J. - New York  
Avon, 1978
- 'It's not the End of the World'  
Blune, J - London  
(Piccolo) Pan Books, 1972

**Look for these and others in  
your local library or book store**