

# Nine Basic Needs of Parents and Children for a Successful Adaptation to Divorce

by Kids First<sup>sm</sup> Center

Kids First has developed a list of *nine basic needs* of parents and children for a successful adaptation to divorce. We believe that when parents attempt to meet as many of these needs as possible under the circumstances, the children will benefit enormously. It is often not possible to meet all these needs at any one time.

Sometimes it is necessary to achieve a balance between competing needs. For example, the first basic need is that children need significant relationships with both parents, if possible. However, when there is violence or abuse in a family, safety needs to compete with relationship needs. As noted by Judith Wallerstein in *Surviving the Break-Up: How Children and Parents Cope with Divorce*:

In the real world, some parents are detrimental to their children. In such situations, it may be in the children's best interests not to have close contact with a parent. On the other hand, occasional contact may prevent children from idealizing an inadequate parent. These are complicated matters that need to be addressed case by case.

REMEMBER: these *nine basic needs* are presented as ideals to strive for when making decisions about your children's future and you own. No parent can achieve all of them all the time.

## **1. Children benefit from significant relationships with both parents, to whatever extent possible.**

Despite the conflicts between their parents, children usually remain attached to both of their parents. Being deprived of contact with one parent can lead to idealization of that parent and anger at the parent who is stifling that connection. A child will also feel less valued if one parent chooses not to maintain contact. Why doesn't my parent like me enough to reach out to me? When parents support each other's relationship with the children, children can gain from both parents. Each parent offers something different and important to each of the children.

## **2. Children benefit from being raised in an atmosphere where ongoing conflict and tension are minimized.**

Children are often caught in the middle of conflict between parents. Parents may try to enlist their children as allies or use them as messengers or confidants. Even if they aren't directly involved, the tension of ongoing conflict doesn't allow children to focus on being themselves and enjoying life. Children who are caught between warring parents frequently suffer long-term emotional damage. In addition, children learn by observing their parents, and can acquire valuable skills in effective decision-making. But when the post-divorce relationship is conflict-ridden over a sustained period of time, children will experience only non-productive methods for dealing with conflict.

## **3. Children have the right to physical and emotional safety.**

Physical and emotional violence and substance abuse by parents has a major impact on children. It leaves them worrying about their own safety. Children need their home to be a safe space, if they are to be able to face the outside world with confidence.

#### **4. Children in the midst of the divorce process continue to need effective parenting.**

When adults are involved in a divorce their attention can easily become focused on their own needs and problems. Children, however, need their parents' attention and guidance more than ever. They need the safety of knowing that their parents are going to be there to supervise.

#### **5. Children need significant amounts of environmental stability.**

For children, home represents security. It is a place that is always familiar, that you can retreat to and relax. Any necessary changes should involve considerable preparation and support.

#### **6. Children need adequate financial support, as well as the feeling that they are not a financial imposition.**

When parents fight about money, children often get the sense that their needs place an undue burden on their parents. Money conflicts should remain only between the two parents. Financial decisions regarding children's needs should be made considering available resources, and decisions should not be held hostage to the financial conflicts between parents.

#### **7. Children need each parent to support the other parent's relationship with them.**

When parents undermine each other, the child is often left in the middle, feeling torn. Children want to remain close to both their parents. The parent who supports their children's relationship with the other parent is the one who doesn't create emotional conflicts. In the long run, this is likely to result in a better relationship with the child.

#### **8. Parents, after divorce, must find a new way of defining effective parenting.**

"Shared parental rights and responsibilities" require parents to find a way of communicating and making joint decisions without the emotional intimacy of a marriage. Children need their parents to make decisions for them and to negotiate the details of their lives. To be done effectively, this requires focusing on the children's needs. Each parent must also learn a new way of parenting; they must be both the nurturer and the limit setter.

#### **9. Parents need to develop new meaningful lives of their own.**

Happy, well-adjusted parents who have lives of their own, independent of their children, make better parents. We are also models for our children. The ways we behave tell our children about what is possible.

*Excerpt from "Parenting Through Divorce," by Kids First Center, Inc. Portland Maine*