

# Less Than Ideal Situations

While much of the advice offered to separated and divorced parents focuses on developing a cooperative parenting relationship, there are some situations where these ideals may not completely apply. Any circumstance that places a child at risk either emotionally or physically must be managed in a way that protects and preserves the child's safety.

### Situations that require special consideration are:

- Domestic abuse – physical, emotional or sexual abuse between parents or by one parent towards another parent.
- Physical, emotional or sexual abuse of a child.
- Addiction issues.
- Parental neglect or abandonment.
- Alienation of children by a parent.

While it is important for children to maintain a loving relationship with both Mom and Dad, **the physical and emotional well being of children should always be of paramount importance.**

It is important to note that a difference in parenting styles or values does not automatically mean a child is in danger. A parent allowing children to have fries and sodas for dinner while watching the television until midnight is very different from a parent who drives in the car with children while intoxicated. Situations that involve parenting differences need to be addressed but not necessarily to the same degree.

**Domestic abuse and addiction issues**  
In some situations, especially those involving domestic violence or addiction issues, a parent may try to minimize the seriousness of the abuse/violence or not talk about it all in an effort to shield children from what is happening in the family. In fact, most children are keenly aware of the abuse. As many as 80% of children are either in the same room or in the next room when the violence occurs.

Other parents may hang on to the hope that the behavior of the abusing parent will eventually change and therefore work to keep the peace instead of protecting themselves and their children. When this happens, the non-offending parent places both themselves and their children at enormous risk. Even when things improve for a period of time, significant change can only occur if the offending parent has acknowledged the problem and is actively seeking professional help. If you are a non-offending parent, you need to be relentless in advocating for the safety of your child or children. In many cases, this means getting the protection of the legal system.

In addition to physically protecting children, it is extremely important that you as a parent support your children emotionally about difficult situations that involve inappropriate or dangerous behaviors of a parent. Often children involved in these types of situations have ambivalent feelings about the other parent. Some may feel deeply responsible for a parent's behavior, while others may feel quite conflicted and worry about betraying one or both parents. How children are able to handle difficult situations is influenced by many different factors. One of the most significant aspects however is how parents talk with children and help them understand the situation. The following recommendations are designed to help you support your children in managing their feelings about what has happened in the family.

### Tips for helping children manage difficult situations

#### Acknowledge what has happened and allow children to talk

Some parents mistakenly believe that talking with children about a serious situation such as domestic violence or addiction will either overwhelm or scare children. Actually, not talking about the situation leaves children defenseless and often feeling more afraid because they do not understand what has happened or why. Talk with your children openly and honestly, offering them age appropriate explanations and information. Children usually feel a great sense of relief when they have received permission from a parent to talk about the situation. Children also need to know that they can talk about their feelings and ask questions without being fearful of making things worse or getting in trouble.

If you are unsure what to say to your children, seek out professional support or guidance. Listed in the appendix are a number of national resources that can assist you in finding the help needed for both you and your children.

#### Educate your children about the problem

Along with supporting children's feelings, it is vital that you educate them about the problem. Educating children helps them:

- Understand the situation is not something they can influence or control.
- Identify dysfunctional behavior.
- Increases the likelihood that children will not repeat the behavior in their own lives.
- Build skills versus feeling afraid.
- Feel empowered instead of helpless.

Help children learn how to stay safe by teaching them personal protection skills such as:

- How to recognize and or avoid unsafe situations.
- When and how to call for emergency help.
- How to find and approach a safe adult when there is a crisis.

Additional suggestions are available online at <http://www.abanet.org/tips/dvsafety.html>.

#### Talk about the problem - not the person

While it may be challenging at times, avoid making statements that criticize or condemn the other parent. Help your child to understand the dynamics of the issue, abuse or addiction in a way they can understand. If needed, find resources for children such as books or educational pamphlets that will help to explain the dynamics of the problem. **Children need to know that their safety takes priority over everything else.** Let them know the destructive behavior is not appropriate and that you hope in the future their other parent will be able to make better choices.

#### Reinforce that what has happened is not their fault

Many children in difficult situations feel guilty or responsible for what has happened in the family. Make sure your children know that the situation is not their fault and that they cannot change their other parent's behavior.

