

# Separation — a Challenge for

by Catherine Lee

**S**eparation and divorce are painful processes for many Canadian families. Children of all ages react to the news that their parents are separating, but the way they react depends on their age, gender and temperament.

Beaver-aged children may show regression – that is, they may slip back and act as they did when they were younger. They may be more clingy and whiny, start thumb-sucking and generally need more reassurance. Cub-aged children may be concerned that the separation is somehow their fault – they need reminders that it is an adult decision. They need to know that Mom and Dad will always love them and will maintain their regular

activities. Boys at this age may be a bit more challenging and hard to manage, whereas some girls may take on a protective role and try to be extra good. Scout-aged youth are at a stage of trying to figure out who is to blame. They are vulnerable to loyalty conflicts and may feel torn between parents, or (as one thirteen-year-old described it) “like the peanut butter, squished in a sandwich with Mom and Dad as the bread”.

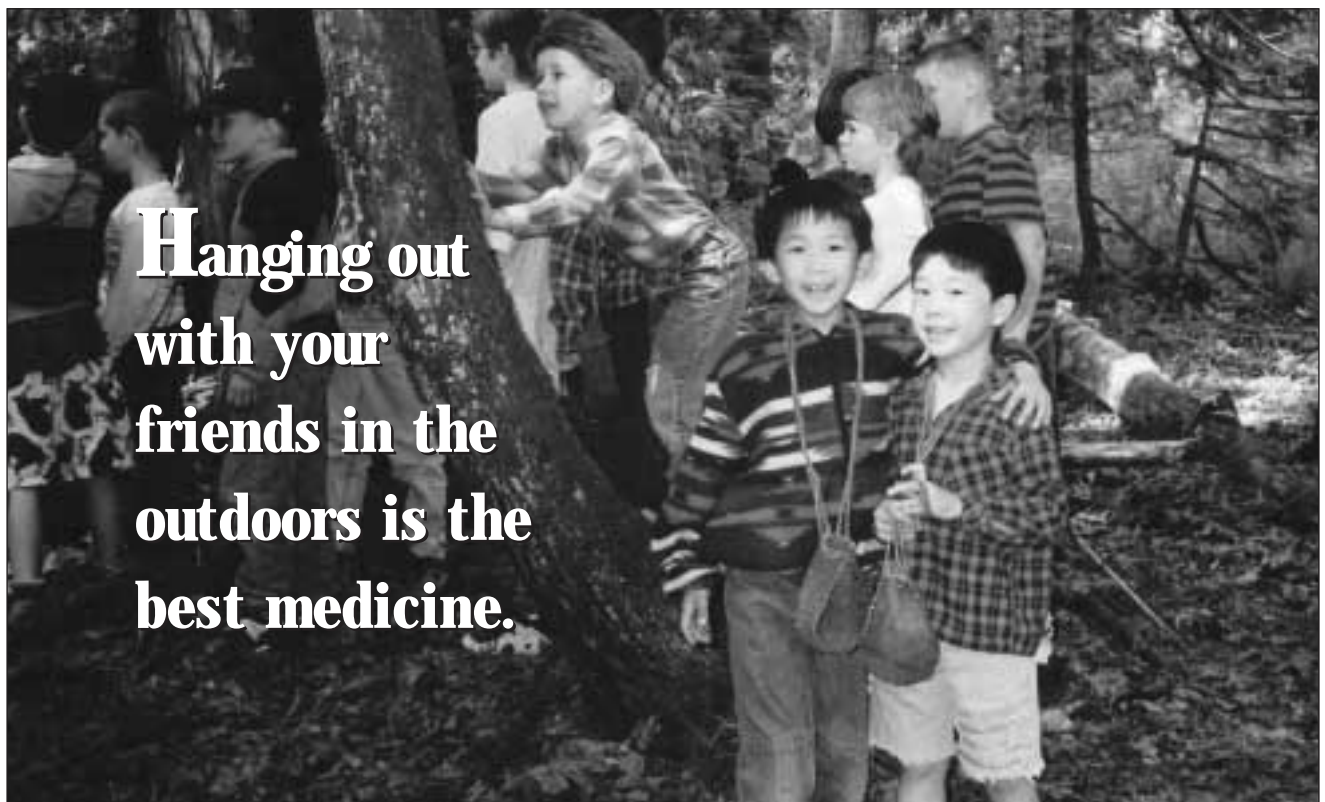
## **The lead-up to parental separation**

Most couples do not make a joint decision to separate. Usually, one person thinks about the possibility of separation and agonizes over the decision. It often takes around two years to reach a final decision. The other person may feel that it is sudden and that the couple should keep trying to improve the marriage. The decision-making phase is difficult for everyone in

the family. There may be painful arguments. Both parents hurt. One parent may be absent from the home more than usual. Even if adults decide to keep their disagreements civil and do not yell, children are usually aware of an atmosphere of tension in the home.

## **The transition phase**

When a person says they wish to separate or get divorced, it is a time of crisis for everyone in the family. Everyone hurts. On top of the emotional issues, there are lots of practical issues to be addressed. At least one person has to find a new place to live, lawyers are consulted, and possessions are divided. An arrangement must be reached for how two parents will care for their children when they live in two different homes. During this time, no one is at their best. Parents experience more intense feelings than usual – sadness, anger, relief, disappointment, frustration, guilt, hope.



**Hanging out  
with your  
friends in the  
outdoors is the  
best medicine.**

Photo: Greg Byron

# and Divorce

# Youth and Leaders

They are more likely to experience a host of annoying hassles – lock their keys in the car, slip on the ice, get in a fender bender. Not surprisingly, with so much going on most adults are not at their best as parents either – compared to their normal behaviour, they may be more inconsistent, more irritable, and less positive. Experts agree that this transition phase usually lasts around two years.

## Long-term adjustment

The good news is that most families settle into new routines and successfully build new lives for themselves. An increasing number of families choose to have a shared parenting agreement in which both parents maintain an active role in their children's lives. This may involve the child spending time at each parent's home. With the best intentions in the world, it is a process of trial and error to work out this new living arrangement. Most families experience some bumps along the road, especially at the beginning.

## How Scouting can help youth whose parents are separating

Experts agree that at a time when so many major things in life are changing, it is helpful to hold on to as many healthy habits as possible. Participation in Beavers, Cubs or Scouts offers continuity for young people during a time of transition. Young people are comfortable with the familiar routines of the program, and the fun activities provide a great break from tensions at home. Mastering challenges in a safe environment can provide a great boost to self-esteem. Even if children never talk to leaders directly about the stresses at home, youth benefit from coming to our programs. Some youth may welcome being in a place where the separation is not the number one topic of conversation. For others, a relationship with a trusted leader may offer a safe place to talk about the challenges they are facing.

## Challenges

Parents who are undergoing a major personal stress can pose challenges for leaders.

## Registration

In late summer, many leaders routinely call the families of children who were involved in the program

book, and who will pay. It is not unusual for the choice of children's activities to become another topic for arguments. What this means for leaders is that extra patience is required; we must remember that parents are doing the best they can at a tough time in their lives.

It is essential that we gather con-

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the previous year. This can be an especially helpful reminder for families who are in the upheaval of a separation. The decision of whether or not to register the child in the program requires parents to talk, to figure out who will sign up, who will bring the child, who will buy the uniform and

tact information on the two parents involved in the child's life. Living in two homes is inevitably more expensive than living in one and many mother-headed families live in poverty; so it is possible that following separation, some families will need help to cover registration costs.

**Messy activities can provide just the laughter you need.**



Photo: Neil Macintosh

### Meetings

It may take a while to get into a routine; youth whose families are in the process of separating or getting a divorce may be more likely to arrive late, and to find that they have left clothing, books or craft activities at the other parent's home.

### Outings and camps

If a child spends time in two homes, arrangements for outings and camps become more complicated. It may be necessary to make reminder phone calls to two homes rather than one.

parent who does not live with them can still play an important role in their lives. Leaders can help by showing that it is possible to have a good relationship with both parents.

### Two of everything

Be prepared with extra copies of everything, in case the vital documents (newsletter, permission form, camp list) is at the other parent's home. Be prepared to make two phone calls rather than one – but always make sure that you do not criticize one parent to the other.

### Extra time

When young people are going through big changes at home, they may benefit from a little extra attention from leaders. Find opportunities to chat casually and encourage them in their activities. Don't try to get them to talk about what's going on at home. If they want to talk, they will initiate it.

### Provide routine and structure in your program

At a time of many changes, young people benefit from predictability. It's comforting to know what you are expected to do as well as what behaviour is acceptable. You don't do any favours to youth by allowing them to behave inappropriately because their parents are separating, or indeed at any other time.

### If the young person wants to talk...

When adults want to talk about something important, they sit down face-to-face. For young people it's just the opposite – they find it easiest when they are *not* looking at adults. Some of the best conversations may take place when you are doing something else – sanding a Kub Kar, hiking in the forest, or gathering at a campfire.

Sometimes young people reveal what is going on in their lives by talking about someone else – another child, a character in a book or in a movie. **Do not** try to make them see the connection by asking if it is just like them.

The best way to encourage young people to talk is to be a good listener. Don't try to talk the young person out of feeling bad. Just reflecting back to them can be very helpful: *sounds like lots of things have changed, your*

# Separation and divorce are painful for everyone in the family. Participation in Beavers, Cubs or Scouts, and compassionate leaders, can help a child who is facing this challenging and painful time.

### Solutions

Recognize that it is likely that every colony, pack and troop will include some young people who have gone through, are going through, or will go through a parental separation. Make sure that we do not inadvertently convey that all families include a mom and a dad who live together. Do not take sides – treat both parents with equal respect and give both information about the program. It can be helpful for children to know that a

### Avoid loyalty conflicts

Young people whose parents are separating may overhear criticism of one parent by other family members. This is hurtful and confusing to them. It is important that we do not add to their distress by criticizing the parent who shows up late, forgets the permission form, and does not replace the woggle that was lost weeks ago. With younger children, it's probably best to speak directly to parents, rather than ask children to pass messages.



## Scouting's Mission

The mission of Scouting is to contribute to the education of young people, through a value system based on the Scout Promise and Law, to help build a better world where people are self-fulfilled as individuals and play a constructive role in society.

## Énoncé de Mission du scoutisme

La mission du scoutisme consiste à contribuer au développement des jeunes afin de leur permettre d'atteindre leur plein potentiel physique, intellectuel, social et spirituel en tant qu'individus, citoyens et membres de la collectivité sur les plans local, national et international par l'application de nos principes et pratiques.





Mom/Dad moved out, you go to a new school, and you have moved; hmm, it really bugs you when Dad and Mom don't get along.

Young people are very clear when they have had enough of a heavy conversation. They may suddenly say *I don't want to talk about it anymore* or may abruptly change the conversation *Can I go get a drink of water?* Resist the temptation to try to keep them talking.

Separation and divorce are painful for everyone in the family. We can expect different reactions according to the child's age and temperament, and in the way the parents are reacting. Participation in Beavers, Cubs or

Scouts, and compassionate leaders, can help a child who is facing this challenging and painful time. \

**Further Reading:**

Nicholas Long & Rex Forehand. (2002). *Making divorce easier on your child: 50 effective ways to help children adjust.* Contemporary Books.

Isolina Ricci (1997). *Mom's house, dad's house: A complete guide for parents who are separated, divorced or living apart.* (2nd ed) Simon & Schuster.

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**A little one-on-one time means so much.**

Photo: Scouts Canada Archives

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