



Separating?

Once the decision to separate is made, there are a number of other issues to settle. If the decision has been made in isolation, there is the matter of informing one's spouse. Thereafter comes telling the kids. From there, attention is directed towards determining the ongoing care of the children between the separated parents. Then there is the matter of settling housing, finances and ongoing financial obligations. For some people, these issues begin to blend together, overwhelming them with the enormity of the consequences.

Underneath all decisions are associated feelings. Each issue brings a host of emotions, mostly dark and upsetting. The parties are dealing with the loss of the relationship, let alone the fantasy of how things should have been. There is worry as to the impact on the children, ongoing parent-child relationships, and economic hardship. Feelings may include anger, resentment, depression, fear and in some situations, even elation. Typically it is the feelings that drive decisions. Many people directly or indirectly seek retribution in how they settle the cascade of issues. People also may seek to make quick and rash decisions, serving to assuage their feelings and fears.

In the wake of the decision to separate, many people turn to a lawyer first, seeking to preserve rights and turf. The decision to separate is then communicated to the other party by way of a legal letter, not only telling of the separation, but laying out the demands and expectations for settlement. With the rug pulled out from beneath them, the other party, in a tizzy, is seldom able to respond reasonably given the information just befallen them. Hence the response may be nothing more than an outpouring of their emotion, upset, rage, sadness and fear, disguised as a counter to the demands of the other. Then the couple, like a ship, makes a series of over-corrections, trying to counterbalance competing demands; they veer left, then right, further left and further right, harder and harder, until their matter reaches epic proportions, spilling over into the courts.

Separating is always counter-intuitive. No person enters a long-term committed relationship saying that in time, they seek to lose their love and develop

animosity enough to drive them from the relationship. These are always upsetting times and when upset drives decisions, poor decisions are often made further compounding problems. The ones to suffer most in the process are children. Statistically, it is not the distribution of assets, residential setting or even the access schedule that determines the outcome for children. It is singularly the level of conflict between the parents that most determines how their children will fare during and after the process and how they shall fare in their own adult intimate relationships later on.

Upon a decision to separate, parents would be wise to call to a counsellor well trained and versed in separation and divorce matters. Please note, this is a specialty and very different to working with persons on other individual, emotional or psychological matters. The counsellor trained and versed in separation and divorce matters will help the couple identify and manage the issues that contributed to the decision to separate and will maintain a clarity of vision to help the couple truly sort out what is best for their children, given their situation. Further, most counsellors, trained and versed in separation and divorce matters can facilitate referrals to financial and legal services and would do so with the view to preserving the integrity of the parties and relationships.

The goal of the separation is to permit for the untangling of lives, whilst still respecting and maintaining relationships vital to the care and development of the children.

It can be scary seeing the counsellor, but parents are advised to consider this a mature decision aimed at managing their feelings to achieve an outcome best for everyone combined and especially, their children.

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Gary Direnfeld is a social worker. Courts in Ontario, Canada, consider him an expert on child development, parent-child relations, marital and family therapy, custody and access recommendations, social work and an expert for the purpose of giving a critique on a Section 112 (social work) report. Call him for your next conference and for expert opinion on family matters. Services include counselling, mediation, assessment, assessment critiques and workshops.