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The case for progress

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Split Decisions

Practical advice about putting children first during separation and divorce.
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These days, almost half of the marriages in the United States are likely to end in divorce. About half of all children, including many under the age of five, live with and through family breakdown.

The impact of separation and divorce on children of any age is, of course, substantial. In When Parents Part, psychologist Penelope Leach, president of the Child Development Society and the author of Baby & Child and Child Care Today, provides lots of sound practical advice to parents about managing changes that she claims may be good for one or both of them but “will quite certainly be bad for their children.”
Leach does not believe that parents should stay together for the children. She insists, however, that the current and future happiness and well-being of the children should take priority because their future as adults depends on their emotional well-being during their formative years.

Putting children first, Leach maintains, should result in abandoning some standard custody arrangements. In most instances, for example, babies and toddlers (under the age of four) should not spend nights away from their mother (who is almost always their primary caregiver) and their “home.” Warm, lively, attentive interactions with them, delivered in settings other than overnight visits, which often result in anxiety and stress, she writes, are essential to the growth of attachment security with the “second parent.” If they remain available, Leach adds, dads will “soon matter just as much” as moms.

The recommendations in *When Parents Part* are wide-ranging, incisive and candid. Leach assesses the role of courts in mandating child support, custody, and visitation rights. She claims that trying to get children to take sides, sabotaging communications or preventing visits with an “ex” are the worst things a parent can do. Paternal grandparents, Leach points out, are vulnerable to exclusion and special efforts may well be necessary to connect them to their grandchildren. Custodial parents, she suggests, might make Thanksgiving or Christmas an extended family day, “his family as well as yours.” Leach identifies appropriate ages for children to be left with a babysitter or unsupervised and travel on a bus, train or plane unaccompanied by an adult. Tempting though it may be, Leach counsels divorced parents not to allow a new romantic partner to behave like a parent, by picking up a daughter from a late party or backing up a punishment.

Leach understands that for divorced families “money matters” – and that mother-only families are all too likely to be poor. That said, Leach often seems to be addressing a rather affluent audience. She reviews the pros and cons of boarding schools. She recommends that both parents purchase the software their kids need for schoolwork. And she reminds non-custodial parents that if their cello-playing child has a concert the day after an overnight visit, the instrument should be delivered to school the previous day.

Although Leach denies that the message of her book “is all doom and gloom,” *When Parents Part* (perhaps because it does not address the pre-separation experiences of children in dysfunctional families) does at times accentuate the negative implications of divorce. As their families break up, parents are, no doubt, “upset, miserable, furious.” One or both of them, however, may also be relieved. And the atmosphere at home may or not be more “hateful” than it had been.

Most important, although Leach is right to point out that children “are not born resilient,” many of them have developed the will and ability to cope with the challenges that accompany separation and divorce. “Even a moment” when a young child is not sure which parent is in charge of her, Leach writes, “may be enough to make her panicky.” That feeling, however, may not last.

These caveats notwithstanding, *When Parents Part* should command the attention of adults touched by separation and divorce. Penelope Leach has taken a “vital first step” in reversing the
adult-centric approach to the break-up of families. She has made a compelling case that when the family unit is broken, separated partners must do everything in their power to attend to the needs of their children, treat them like people rather than possessions, and commit to mutual (but not necessarily equal) parenting.