

CHILDREN & DIVORCE GUIDE



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How do I tell the kids? Will they blame me? How can I protect them from the conflict? Will they be afraid to get married? How do I bring structure back into my family life?

These are just some of the many far-reaching questions that parents struggle with during and after divorce. This special **Children and Divorce Guide** provides you with useful articles, book excerpts, advice, and more. You'll find information and insights to assist you to make wise decisions – which will help put your children on the path to a happy future.



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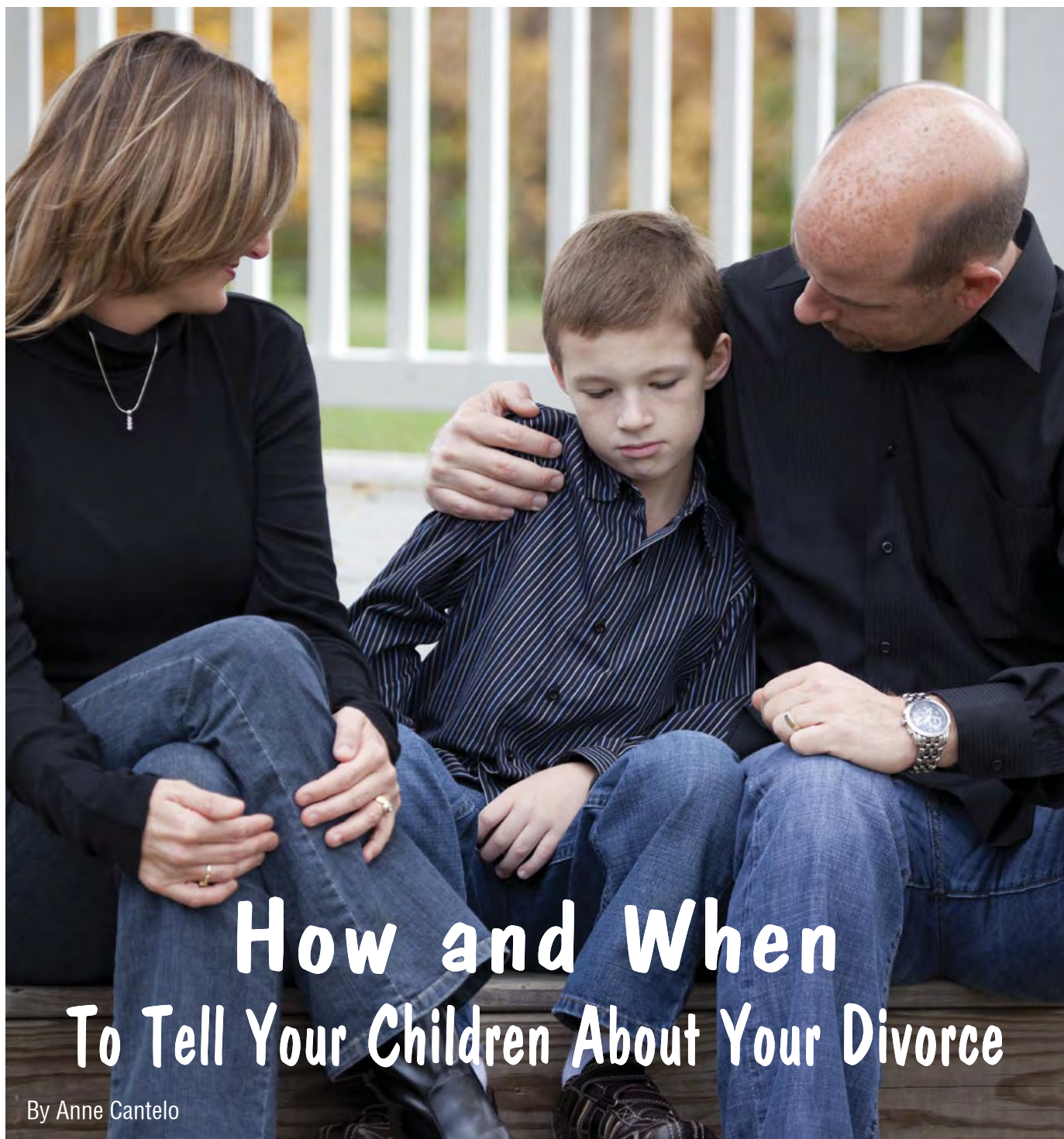
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How and When To Tell Your Children About Your Divorce

By Anne Cantelo

It's no easy task for parents to break the news of their divorce to the children. Here are some dos and don'ts that will help.

Your children will probably remember the moment you tell them that you're separating for the rest of their lives. It's therefore something that needs careful thought and preparation; you don't want them to find out from someone else, or worse, in the heat of an argument, e.g., 'Your father doesn't want us anymore.' Your children will try very hard to find out why. It's unlikely, particularly if they're very young, that they'll have had any idea that this is going to happen, even if you've been arguing a lot or one of you has been violent towards the other. So be prepared for their shock.

The don'ts:

- Don't approach your children until you're absolutely sure that this is the end; it's not something you want them worrying about unnecessarily.
- Don't assume that because your children are older that they'll not be as deeply affected (the reverse is usually true).
- Don't use the opportunity to get your side of the argument across to your children or paint your spouse as the villain (even if you think they are).
- Don't use your children to argue the case for keeping the family together. It's a terrible burden to put on them, sets unrealistic expectations that they can 'save their lives' and is emotional blackmail against your spouse. And do you really want to be married to someone who's only with you because your children begged them?
- Don't do it in a public setting or in front of other relatives or friends. This is a private moment; your children will probably be distressed and no one likes breaking down in front of other people.
- Don't try and defend your actions or get into an argument about it.
- Don't expect to be asked questions straightaway, they may need time to take it in.
- Don't leave it to your spouse to handle alone; your children may want to speak to you too.
- Don't avoid telling them and just disappear one day; you need to let them get used to the idea before one of you leaves the home.
- Don't assume they're going to be devastated and encourage that emotion; be prepared for it but also accept that children react in different ways, and some may actually be relieved, particularly if you've been fighting a lot.

Some of these may sound obvious but they're all based on real-life accounts. If you have more than one

child make sure they all find out from you and not from each other or from listening at doors. This will give them a distorted idea of what's going to happen, and because you've not discussed it openly they're likely to feel less able to tell you their worries and concerns.

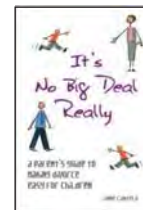
I find it alarmingly common for one or both parents to tell their children that they've always been unhappy in the marriage. If you tell your children that, it makes them question their whole childhood up to that point and their part in your unhappiness. You're effectively telling them that all those times that they felt they were in a happy family were all lies. Children find that very difficult to deal with and they'll be very suspicious of happiness in the future. They might also feel guilty if they think you only stayed together for their sake. Children want to look back and think that they were part of a happy family. Don't take that away from them.

The dos:

- Try to speak to each child on his or her own and get out of earshot of the others. This should be one-to-one or two-to-one (with both parents there) if possible so that they feel free to ask questions and have your complete attention.
- Be loving and affectionate; recognize and accept their pain (but don't anticipate or encourage it if it's not there).
- Reassure them of your love and of the love of your spouse for them (if he or she isn't with you).
- Reassure them that you'll both be in their lives.
- Promise them that you will be friendly with your spouse.

Children want to look back and think that they were part of a happy family. Don't take that away from them.

- Be prepared to answer their questions, and also for their refusal to talk about the divorce.
- Be ready to come back to the subject when they're ready.
- Make what you say age-appropriate.
- Be there for them: choose a time when you don't have to rush off to do something else.
- Let them be by themselves if they want: some children will want to grieve in private before they're ready to talk to you.
- Be as honest as you can be with them. It's good to let them know you're upset but try to cut out the bitterness you feel. ■



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A photograph of a man with short brown hair and a light beard, wearing a white tank top, holding a young girl with blonde hair in pigtails tied with blue bows. The girl is resting her head on the man's shoulder and looking towards the camera. They are outdoors with a blurred green background.

The Best Interest of the Child

By Mike Mastracci

It has been said that the best interest standard really comes down to a judge's "best guess" as to what is optimal for a child in any particular case. The sad reality is that in the majority of cases each parent tries to look his or her best by making the other parent look inept.

The best interest of the child standard is not supposed to be a test on "good parent" vs. "bad parent" decision-making. However, although some courts may characterize the criteria and terminology differently, the gist of the court's reasoning in deciding who gets custody is to evaluate certain "factors." The court examines these factors and weighs the advantages and disadvantages of the alternative environments – who the

children get to live with. The criteria for judicial determination include, but is not limited to:

- Fitness of the parents
- Character and reputation of the parties
- Desire of the natural parents and agreements between the parties
- Potentiality of maintaining natural family relations
- Preference of the children
- Material opportunities affecting the future of the children
- Age, health, and sex of the children
- Residences of parents and opportunity for visitation
- Length of separation from the natural parents
- Prior voluntary abandonment or surrender of the child or children

The court might be asked to consider the preference of the child. This is a dangerous proposition and although courts may, depending on the age and maturity of the child, “consider” the preference of the child, the child’s say is generally not much of a factor until approaching or into the teen years. Even then, it is one terrible place for a child to be. To ask a child to pick sides is downright cruel.

The court should also consider the potentiality of maintaining natural family relations. I firmly believe that this really should be a central focus of what it is all about, especially in high-conflict cases. Even if one parent seems significantly superior in general parenting skills yet constantly does all that is possible to restrict the children’s access to the other parent, the resulting constant conflict and power struggle will never be in the children’s best interests.

Hopefully, the judge will award primary custody to the parent who will most allow the children to grow up with a mother and a father actively involved in the children’s lives. Often, that does not happen and the children pay the price.

When it comes to following “the law,” judges perhaps have the most discretion in the area of child custody disputes. In practice, they apply facts – or at least “facts” as they appear to them. They decide what the facts are and they decide how to best remedy whatever facts they deem in need of judicial intervention. The “rules of law” give them great latitude when it comes to determining what they believe to be in a child’s best interest. Ultimately, they make the major decisions pertaining to each family law case. They, not you, get to decide how things will be. Such discretion may or may not be a good thing, depending on who is doing the judging and why.

Think about this. The judge comes on the bench and says that he has read the information in the case file and it looks like the same old nonsense that he sees day in and day out. He then goes into a stern lecture along the lines that he does not know your children, has never met them, and of all the people in the courtroom, he likely knows the least about them. Furthermore, even at the end of the case he will still know very little about your children. Yet, you two, the parents, are willing to let him, a complete stranger, tell you how you will raise your children.

“Make no mistake about it,” the judge can rightly say, “I do have the complete and sole authority to order when each of you will see your child and when you will not. I can make the schedule for you. I can decide

who makes all the decisions, some of the decisions, or none of the decisions. I can order you to all kinds of classes, treatment, and counselling if I find that there is a need and that it would be in your children’s best interest. I will tell you when your vacation is and who will wake up with the children on Christmas morning. And when I am done, you are out of my thoughts and you will live with these rulings until your children reach the age of majority, or until you come back. When you come here to my courtroom, these children belong to me. I will hold onto this file. I’m the new daddy in town.”

Certainly, by this time the parents are a nervous wreck. Something will sink into at least one of them. A good judge might continue, “You asked to be here and you still have a chance to get out. While you look like nice people, I don’t know you and I really care very little about either of you. I do, fortunately, care a great deal about your children; apparently, I care more than each of you. I would never let a stranger decide the fate of my children. Now, I am going to go back into chambers and I want your lawyers to bring me as many resolved issues as possible and depending on your progress, I will decide when and how we proceed. I will be here until 5:00 p.m. and so will you, so I suggest you make the best of your day. It would be in your children’s best interest for you to work all these issues out. Now, after all day, if you can’t even decide on things like a holiday and vacation

If you do not settle your child access issues following a separation or divorce, you will ultimately turn your children’s fate over to a virtual stranger: a judge.

schedule, you surely are both going to leave here very unhappy. If we have to have a trial and if I have to make these decisions for you, I will have no qualms about any decision that I make. You may, but that is not my problem, it will be yours. Now, grow up, put your anger and pride aside, be parents. This is not a child friendly place. Now counsel, bring me an agreement on something within an hour. I know each of you highly skilled attorneys can work this out. Now, unless someone has something profound to say, we will remain in recess until you bring me an agreement on something. Have I made myself clear?"

More than likely you will be able to hear a pin drop amidst some sniffling from a teary-eyed mom or dad who may have had an awakening and be willing to negotiate in good faith. Hopefully, they will both be moved by such an "enlightening"

monologue. Once the attorneys have their respective client's undivided attention, it is time to get to work. At some point in time there will be some agreement – even if the parties agree that on Mother's Day the children will be with their mother and on Father's Day they will be with their father. In building from there, they can further decide if these special days will be spent from say 10:00 a.m. until 8:00 p.m. or how about from the night before – Saturday night at 6:00 p.m. until Sunday at 6:00 p.m., for example? From there, perhaps a discussion and agreement on which parent shall provide the transportation on the Mother's Day and Father's Day exchanges would be appropriate. The lawyers can then build from there, and even the slow and tedious momentum of such "baby steps" on this path will be better than a leap of faith in a courtroom.

Even if the parents will never agree on who should have primary custody of their child, they can make two schedules, one if the children are with dad and one if they are with mom. Ideally, it may all be the same except for which parent will spend more time with the children. The judge can then simply decide, if still needed, which parent gets the better of the two agreed-upon schedules. Otherwise, the parties have no control over the ultimate outcome and it may be completely different than either of them expected. ■



This article has been edited and excerpted from the book *STOP Fighting Over the Kids*, permission by Mike Mastracci, copyright © 2009. Mike Mastracci is the presi-

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What Your Child Wants Most Is To Freely Love Both Parents

By Shannon R. Rios

This really seems like such a simple request but divorcing or separated parents can make this such a hard task for children. If your child can freely love both of you and know that they have good parents, they will be closer to loving themselves. They will have a better foundation provided to them from which to build love for themselves. This is so crucial for your child, I cannot stress this enough. Authors and mediators Elizabeth Hickey and Elizabeth Dalton tell us that children will not question their lovability if the relationship with both of their parents is fostered.



Remember to avoid saying things to your child like, “That (insert child’s negative behavior here) is just like your father.” This comment hurts your child at their core – it acknowledges their connection to their other parent while at the same time criticizes them for it. It does not assist them in creating a solid foundation. This comment impacts your child’s self-esteem. It also impacts your child’s ability to create positive self-worth. I like to think of children as being born with a beautiful bright light inside. Each time your child hears a negative comment about someone they love (or are biologically a part of), their light dims just a little until they are really upset inside. When your child is upset on the inside, they act out on the outside. Hearing these negative comments erodes away the vibrant self-love your child was born with. Comments such as these are born out of anger and resentment. One of the best quotes I’ve heard on anger/ resentment is:

“Resentment is like taking your own poison and expecting the other person to die.”

Taking your own poison or giving this poison to your child is not healthy. We know from numerous studies that a great percentage of diseases are stress-related. Looking at the word disease, we can see dis-ease. When we are not at ease we are in stress, which impacts our health and the health of our child. It is your responsibility as a parent to be healthy for your child.

Your child needs you – so let go of the bottle of poison and be healthy so you can attend to your child’s needs. Especially the need of being able to love both parents. An angry parent does not equal a good parent. I ask you to be healthy for your children. You won’t regret it, I promise. ■



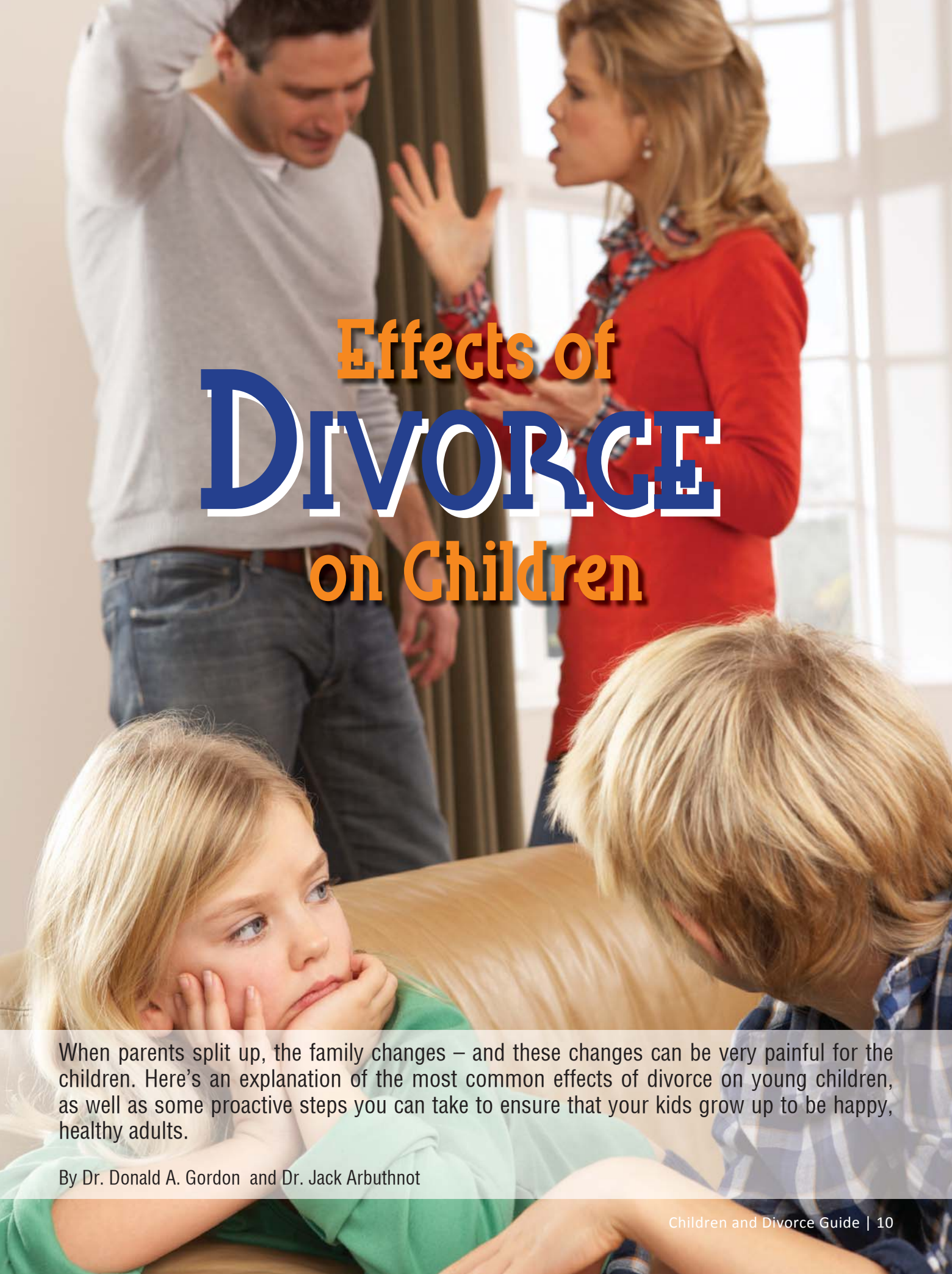
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A photograph of a family in a state of conflict. In the background, a man in a grey sweater and a woman in a red top are arguing. The man has his hand on his head, and the woman is gesturing with her hand. In the foreground, two young children, a girl and a boy, are sitting on a couch, looking downcast and sad. The girl is resting her chin on her hands.

Effects of DIVORCE on Children

When parents split up, the family changes – and these changes can be very painful for the children. Here's an explanation of the most common effects of divorce on young children, as well as some proactive steps you can take to ensure that your kids grow up to be happy, healthy adults.

By Dr. Donald A. Gordon and Dr. Jack Arbuthnot

most parents ask themselves some hard questions when they split up. Parents wonder what the break-up will do to their children. Will the children understand what's going on? How will they react to each parent as the family changes? Will they be OK with a new step-parent? Will they be OK if there are step-siblings? Will their grades in school suffer? Will they draw away from their friends? Will they suffer some emotional harm forever? Does the children's age make a difference? Is it different for boys than for girls?

For most parents, the important thing is that their children survive the split-up. They want their children to grow up to be healthy adults. Many children do, of course. Some are even better off in many ways; for some children, a break-up is better than staying in an unhappy family. A separation can also be better than being in a home where parents argue so much.

This article will discuss the typical reactions of young children – from preschoolers to pre-adolescents – and offer some advice on how to help them through the process.

Preschoolers

Preschoolers most often react to their parents' break-up with fear and guilt. They're confused: young children are not able to understand what is going on and why. They think that if Dad can leave their life, Mom can too. They may think that if parents can stop loving each other, they can also stop loving them. Young children often worry about who will take care of them, if there will be enough food or money, where they'll live, and so on. There really is no age where children are not upset by stress in a bad relationship.

Parents will often see children go back to early behaviors: for example, the child may want a security blanket again, or they may have problems using the toilet. There may be an increase in



wanting to masturbate. They may cry, cling, or disobey. They may have night fears or fears at separation. Children may imagine strange things about why one parent is gone. Children often think they caused the break-up; they may think Dad or Mom would not have gone if they had behaved better. If a parent is very upset, a child may hide his own feelings so he won't upset the parent.

How to Help Preschoolers

Young children need to be told clearly and often that their parents will take care of them, and that both Mom

and Dad still love them. They need to be told that they are still a family, no matter where each family member lives. Parents need to explain in a simple way why the break-up happened; this will help the children know that the problems are between Mom and Dad and that the break-up is not their fault. They need a chance to talk about their fears. Each parent should frequently set aside time to talk to the preschoolers about how they feel. Both parents should spend lots of time with their children.

Parents should also avoid conflict in front of the children. Young children

will listen to their parents' arguing and may think they are to blame. When violence has occurred, the safety of the children must be insured; a violent parent can help repair the harm by setting a good example of anger control. Showing respect for the other parent can undo the damage to children who have seen violence.

Children need to spend good one-on-one time with each parent. Most of them are very sad not to be with the absent parent more – for children under three, one week of being away is too long. Their sense of time is much shorter than that of older children.

Young Children (ages 6–8)

Children aged six to eight years old respond most often with grief. They express their grief through crying and sobbing; this happens with boys more than with girls. They also feel a deep yearning for the absent parent. The children will miss that parent intensely, even if their relationship with the parent was not good before the break-up. Since they don't see the absent parent often, they usually won't express the anger they feel toward him or her. They will express their anger toward the custodial parent, and they may blame him/her for the absence of the other parent. When contact with the absent parent is reduced, children at this age often believe that parent has stopped loving them. This reaction causes emotional trauma.

Young children often hope Mom and Dad will get back together. They may feel that it is their job to take care of and comfort their parents, and many will try to solve the problems between their parents. It is not healthy for young children to reverse roles with their parents.

Research tells us that children are affected when they see their parents fighting. It affects their ideas about how people solve problems with each other. Children do not get used to the

fighting – instead, the fighting wears them down. Physical fighting is especially damaging: children will copy their parents and hit other children.

When parents try to get the child to take sides, there can be a “tug of war” on the emotions of a child. Some parents may tell their children that the other parent is bad, or that the other parent caused the problems. Each parent may really believe this simple view. Children caught in the middle are the most likely to lose this war.

How to Help Young Children

All children need protection from the hurts and anger of parents. They should not feel pressure to take sides, so never criticize the other parent in front of the children. They need to know that both parents still love them. They will be taken care of even if Mom and Dad do not live together. Children must be able to spend time with the absent parent. They need to know it is okay to love that parent. Young children are not sure their parents still love them – so they need more love and support now.

Preteens (ages 9–12)

The response of children aged nine to twelve years old to a break-up is not the same as younger children. This age group is more advanced in their

thinking, and they are able to see many points of view in the matter. Most of these children can understand some of the reasons for the break-up. They will seriously and bravely try to make the best of it.

These children will often hide the distress they are feeling. They may say they see their nonresident parent enough when in fact they miss him or her terribly. They may be afraid to ask for more time with their other parent because they know this will upset the resident parent.

About 25% of children at this age will take sides in the parents' battle, most often siding with the mother. Although they are better able than their younger brothers and sisters to see both sides, they still tend to see things in black-and-white terms. This results in a need to label one parent as “the good guy” and the other parent as the “villain.”

Children at this age are likely to feel intense anger, and unlike their younger siblings, they are very aware of their anger. Anger is normal in the break-up of a family. A badly shaken sense of self is also common at this age. Children may have many health complaints or problems, including infections, headaches, stomachaches, asthma, etc. The stress the children are going through



aggravates these problems. Doctors report that children from split homes come to their offices far more often than other children.

Family break-ups can also lead to problems with peers. Children may not have as many friends as before, and they may fear that their peers will reject them. These children are more likely to become friends with other “rejected” classmates. These new friends may have emotional or behavioral problems, which can lead to more serious problems: failing school, breaking laws, or engaging in risky sex, drug, or alcohol abuse.

Preteens have developed new thinking skills, which allow them to understand cause-and-effect relationships, but they still lack a larger view of how things work. They are likely to feel very let down, and they may “act out” by trying to hurt one or both of their parents using the power they think they have. They might say mean or unkind things, or accuse parents of changing or having moral lapses. They may refuse to spend time with the parent they now see as guilty.

Parents should not accept this: in a gentle way, make your preteens aware that you expect them to be civil and polite to both parents. Concrete examples may help. Remind them that even though Aunt Mary is bossy or Grandma is strict, the children must still go on family visits, during which they are expected to be polite. And even though they may not like a certain teacher, they must still show respect to him/her.

They can be given some control over minor aspects of their time with the other parent. For example, they could choose to take along a friend or suggest activities. Or, they could choose to call the other parent now and then, etc.

How to Help Preteens

Children at this age need to be able to talk to each parent about the break-up

and about life after the break-up – to express their concerns, fears, and complaints. And they can understand a little about how the parents feel. It is okay to say that Mom and Dad do not agree about everything, but tell them that Mom and Dad do agree about the children.

Parents should offer love and support to their preteens, and they need to acknowledge their children’s anger. Often, the children yearn for the parents to get back together. If this is not going to happen (and it usually isn’t), children should be told clearly and with no doubt; creating false hope does not help the children.

Parents must control their anger towards each other. If their anger becomes violent, parents must disengage, and they should avoid contact until they learn control. Parents should minimize conflict in front of their children – this is very important if the conflict is unresolved or is spiteful. Children learn social skills by watching conflicts get resolved; if parents can negotiate and compromise, they model good social skills. This can lessen the effect of the conflict.

Parents must allow the children to love the other parent. Encourage children to call or write letters, and help the children give the other parent gifts on special days (birthdays, Christmas, Father’s Day, etc.).

Say good things about the other parent in front of the children: praise your ex’s good qualities. In spite of your anger and sadness, at one time you saw enough good qualities to want to marry or move in with this person; surely some of those qualities are still there!

For most parents, the important thing is that their children survive the split-up.

Avoid making children “choose sides.” Most parents are not aware how often they do this, and many truly believe they never do this. Trying to get children to side with you damages their relationship with the other parent, which leads to more stress and causes anger toward both parents. ■

This article was adapted with permission from *What About the Children? A Simple Guide For Divorced/Separated And Divorcing Parents* (CDE, eighth edition, 2011) by Donald A. Gordon (Ph.D.) and Jack Arbuthnot (Ph.D.). This booklet is part of the “Children in Between” online course for separating and divorcing parents. www.online.divorce-education.com.

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5 Ways to Keep Children Out of Conflict During Your Divorce

By Allison Fosberry

If you have fought in front of your children, or have said negative things to them about your ex, it's not too late to do the right thing.

Do you hope to make your divorce as easy as possible for your children? Parents often face very stressful situations during a divorce. Sometimes stress can cause parents to vent to their children, and conflict can surface in front of them. It is important to realize that children become anxious when they are exposed to family conflict.

Children rely on their home environment for stability and comfort in order for them to develop emotionally. When there is conflict, it can feel as though their world is crumbling, and their sense of safety and trust becomes compromised. Certain issues that seem trivial to adults are intensified a great deal in the mind of a child.

If you have fought in front of your children, or have said negative things to them about your ex, it's not too late to do the right thing. Here are five ways you can ensure children are left out of conflict:

1 Resolve your anger. You and your ex-spouse are beginning a different relationship as co-parents. Resolving anger and resentment will make your life much easier, and it will make for a relaxed transition. If you need professional help with resolution, get it quickly. Your children will thank you for finding peace, and your interactions with your ex will become stress-free.

2 Discuss issues only when children are not around. It is very important to deal with conflict at a lunch meeting, or another place where children cannot hear. This does not mean going into the bedroom to raise your voice. Children are very perceptive, so even if they can't hear exactly what you are saying, they know you are fighting. They immediately become frightened, and if this continues they can develop persisting issues with anxiety.

3 Don't burden children with adult problems. Children can panic when they hear parents complaining about money, custody, or other issues that they don't fully understand. They immediately think their hockey league or other expenditures are the reason for your worries. It's best to vent about these issues with another adult. Children

usually blame themselves, and when there is a divorce or separation they become even more sensitive.

4 Speak only positively about your ex. Dealing with an ex can be extremely challenging. When you make negative comments, know that you are attacking either your child's mother or their father. When you experience the urge to point out your ex's flaws, imagine how it would feel if someone was attacking one of your parents. Even if your ex is not the best role model, pointing this out only damages their relationship further, and children will eventually resent you for these comments. If you change your attitude and only speak highly of your ex, they will be humbled by your maturity during this difficult time.

5 Ensure they understand the divorce is not their fault. You can never tell your children too many times that they are not responsible for the divorce. Repeatedly explain that divorce happens because relationships change over time, and adult issues are complicated. Emphasize your love for them, and tell them daily that they are not to worry about adult problems. Tell them to concentrate on being children and good students, and that you as parents will solve any problems that may arise.

Unfortunately your marriage has ended for one reason or another, but you can ensure your children don't have to deal with the consequences of their parents' decisions. Find positive ways to nurture your child's relationship with your ex. Your optimism will relieve them, and they will be glad to take a break from worrying about their family situation. When they are old enough to make sense of their childhood, they will be extremely grateful that you took control of your behavior and left them out of conflict. ■

Allison Fosberry, M.A. is a relationship and family counselor practicing in the Greater Toronto Area. A member of the Association for Conflict Resolution, she has worked with children and adults for more than ten years. She is committed to helping divorced couples permanently resolve resentment and develop healthy co-parenting skills. www.alisonfosberry.com.

DISCIPLINE AND BEHAVIOR ISSUES IN **Children of Divorce**



Although it's important to accept that your ex-spouse may have a different parenting style than you, respectfully communicating about your child's behavior and discipline issues can be beneficial to everyone involved.

By Ellen Kellner

Parents have different expectations of their child's behaviour – and divorced parents are no exception. It's okay that the households of different parents have different routines and styles of discipline. You can't control how discipline is handled at your ex's house; you can only control how you handle your child's acting-up. Keep any negative opinions as to his household to yourself, and focus on creating a stable home for you and your child.

Punishment Shouldn't Cross Households

The most effective punishment is an immediate consequence. Having your child be punished at both households doesn't teach discipline, it shows disregard for your ex and his relationship with your child. Which way will you parent?

The Old Way

Your young child may refuse to hold your hand when crossing the street. As you reach down for your child's hand, the response you hear is, "NO!" You may get fed up and shout, "That's it! No television today and that includes Dad's house too!"

Threatening and demanding that punishment should cross households simply isn't an effective way to teach your child.

The Pro-Child Way

The most effective way to deal with poor behavior is to deal with it immediately. Your child not holding your hand has nothing to do with your ex. These daily behavior blips are nothing more than her trying to assert her independence from you. It's up to you to decide if the independence is warranted. Whatever your decision, make it, and make it quickly. Interrupt your child's poor behavior and make her wait until she cooperates. Teach your child that you mean what you say. If there is a next time, it'll go

much smoother. Notice that Dad was not involved in the punishment.

So, let's talk about Dad for a second. How he spends time with his child is for him and your child to decide – not you. You do not control their time, and punishments should not cross households.

When major discipline issues arise, don't insist that your punishment be enforced at the other parent's house. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't tell your ex of the incident or jointly decide on a punishment. If you and your ex agree that a behavior warrants household-crossing punishment, then together both parents should agree and enforce it. Only after you have discussed it with your ex, tell your child these consequences.

As always, the right answer is the answer that best benefits your child. Appropriate punishment is an issue that all parents continually face. If you need assistance, ask your ex – but don't expect him to blindly enforce your punishments.

Don't Use Your Ex as a Threat

When it comes to discipline, always leave your ex's name out of any threats that you make – especially to a child of divorce. Using your ex as a threat will always backfire, and your child's behavior will still need to be addressed.

The Old Way

You child's poor behavior may escalate the closer visitation time gets. You know your child is looking forward to seeing her dad, so to get her attention, you might threaten: "If you don't stop that right now, there will be no going to your father's house tonight!"

When it comes to disciplining your child, focus on your child, not methods that focus on your divorce.

The Pro-Child Way

Using your child's father as a threat or denying visitation rank high on the list of things not to say when you're divorced. The main reason is that you're letting your child's behavior control the visitation schedule, which should never be the case.

This isn't to say that your child can misbehave and leave unpunished just because visitation is starting in a moment. Curtail negative behavior by inflicting immediate consequences: for instance, you could make your child to sit quietly while she's waiting for Dad instead of her usual running around.

There are several problems with threatening your child with the phrase: "Wait till your father hears about this!" It may affect her attitude, but it probably won't affect her behavior at all. When you witnessed her inappropriate behavior, you didn't do anything – except to threaten to tell her dad.

The second, more insidious effect is that you are portraying your ex in a negative light. The focus is no longer on your child's negative behavior, but on your feelings towards your ex. Your role as a parent is to portray your child's father in the best light. Get back to the business at hand: immediately respond to your child's behaviour.

Discuss Incidences with Your Ex

The wrong reason for telling your ex about your child's discipline incidences is focused on you and your ex; the right reason is focused on your child. Discuss discipline incidences with your ex so that your child is raised with love, consistency, and structure.

The Old Way

The evidence is clear: your child, a crayon, and doodles all over the wall. As you are screaming at your child, you reach for the phone and dial your ex. Instead of "Hello," you shriek, "Do you

know what your child just did? That child of yours..." You're tired of your child's acting up, and you're tired of your ex not doing a thing about it. You hand the phone over to your child and wait to see what happens.

The point of communicating is simply to share information so that both parents are aware of and better equipped to handle discipline issues.

The Pro-Child Way

This situation isn't about you being tired or about your issues with your ex. This is your child's issue and your only role as a parent is to handle it. Shrieking at your ex isn't handling it. The point of communicating with your ex is to share information so that both parents are aware of and better equipped to handle discipline issues.

While your child should be aware that you and her dad share information relating to her, she shouldn't directly hear your conversation. Maybe your ex has experienced the same problem and will have some good advice. Maybe you can give your ex a heads-up with a potential recurring situation. In any case, you handled your child's discipline issue, and you communicated it with your ex.

The more information you have, the better parent you'll be – and the same thing goes for your ex-spouse. By sharing the discipline issues and previous responses, both parents can better identify larger behavioral problems.

After the incident is communicated, casually relay to your child the fact that her dad is aware of the issue. Don't tell your child in an intimidating way. Your child will get the subtle message: she has two parents who talk to each other.

Share information with your ex, and listen when your ex shares with you. Keep the attention and the process focused on your child.

Different Places, Different Disciplines

Before and after the divorce, your child has two parents, each with their own discipline styles. Focus on disciplining your child as the parent that you are, not as the divorced ex that you've become.

The Old Way

Your child just came home from your ex's in tears and you zoom in to hear what the evil ex did. You hear: "He doesn't understand me," and you think back to the times your ex didn't understand your feelings. Your child just baited you with the "evil-ex" ploy. Your energies are poured into consoling your child. You don't respond to your child about her instigating actions, but you sure do respond to your child about her father's reaction.

Whether you agree or not with your ex's approach, you have no control over his parenting style. No matter what your opinion, stay focused on your child and not on your ex.

The Pro-Child Way

Your child just came home from her time with her dad in tears. Through her sobs you gather that her dad reacted to something she did, and you wonder what prompted him to discipline her. You hear: "He doesn't understand me," and you prod her to tell you the whole story. Your child goes into detail about how her dad overreacted. During a pause in her story, you say, "What exactly is it that you did?" Instead of focusing on your ex and his reaction, you stay focused on your child and the infraction.

Whether you agree or not with your ex's approach, you have no control over his parenting style. Stay focused on your child and not on your ex. This is your opportunity to ask her questions and listen to how she feels. So long as his reactions aren't cause for a "Protection

From Abuse" order, your child will continue to be with him. Teach her how to do that. With your guidance, your child can still learn from the experience.

While different places may mean different disciplines for your child, you can choose consistency within your own home. You can control how you discipline your child at home – and when she is away, you can control how you guide her through her experiences. This is what being a good parent is all about. ■



This article was adapted with permission from *The Pro-Child Way: Parenting with an Ex* (UnTapped Talent, 2010) by Ellen Kellner. Mindful thinker and

author Ellen Kellner guides parents through The Pro-Child Way® of nurturing their child's spirit through her intuition, discernment, and experience, encouraging heart-centered solutions to divorced parenting situations. *The Pro Child Way: Parenting with an Ex* is for parents who are looking for a conscientious approach to co-parenting after divorce. All of Ellen's work can be found at her website: www.anewdivorce.com

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Co-Parenting Communication

Effective parenting after divorce requires effective communication – both between the co-parents and between the parents and children. www.divorcemag.com/articles/co-parenting-communication



Common Questions Children Ask (and Some Simple Responses)

Children ask many questions during and after a divorce. Some of these questions take parents by surprise, and they are often uncertain of how to answer them.

By Dr. Lisa Rene Reynolds

The following are a few tough questions children have asked in my sessions and some simple, direct ways for parents to respond. Parents should consider the child's age and modify their responses to address the specific situation. There is no one right way to answer a child's questions. However, the following suggestions are good starting points for parents who are struggling with what to say to their kids.

“Why are you and mom getting a divorce?”

“There are many reasons your mom and I are getting divorced. Lots of the reasons you will not be able to

understand until you are older. There are lots of things that Mom and I disagree on, and these things are so important that neither one of us can give up what we think and feel. I know it's confusing to you now, but we'll keep talking about it and one day when you're older you might be able to understand it all a little bit better.”

“Do you still love daddy?”

“No, I don't love Daddy the way I used to. It takes a very special kind of love to make a marriage last. It doesn't work the same way that always loving your child works.” Another response might be: “Of course I still love Daddy, but not in the way I used to. There are

many different kinds of love, and the kind you need to make a marriage work, we don't have anymore.”

“Why do you hate Mommy so much?”

“I don't hate Mommy. I get angry with her, yes. But I have gotten angry at many people in my life and not hated them. Your mom is a great person in a lot of ways and there are things I like about her very much. But Mommy and I are disagreeing about lots of things right now and sometimes we get frustrated and mad at each other. We'll work it all out, though.”

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“Dear Judge”- Children’s Letters to the Judge

Do you see your child in any of these letters?

By Charlotte Hardwick

What do you do when you are a child and your heart is breaking? You go to the biggest, strongest people you know. You go to the people you have always counted on. You go to your parents. What do you do when your parents tell you there is nothing they can do to help you? What do you do when they say they don’t get to decide where you live or which one of them you get to kiss good night? Well, these children went straight to the Judge with their hopes, questions and fears.

Dear Judge,
I sure hope you know what you are doing cause none of us do.
~ Jordan

Dear Judge,
tell the home study estimatr that we do not realy live in the nice house she came to. we live at the crumy one. my step mothr made a del with the ladie next dor and we move there fore one day. i want you to tell her to come to my real hous cause i hate my step mothr that is why. cause my stomich fels upset cause she tels my real mom i am not here when she cals.

my dad said she is a ok guy but she is not. he does not like her very much eathr. she play acts that she likes me but when Dad is away she stops actin. pleasee help me get to live with my mom and new sistr. thank you vere munch,
~ emile e.

Dear Judge,
This summer we went to our bio-moms house for 6 weeks of out of state visitation. Mom started asking questions about our friends and school. We told her about what we thought about the dress code, curfew and separating us into different home rooms at school because they think twins need to learn independence from each other. She said we were out of control, disrespectful of authority and needed more discipline. We tried to explain that we get good grades, follow the rules even if we don’t like them and we never get in trouble. It wasn’t until Daddy called to see how things were going that mom finally calmed down. The next day she started to take more of her nerve pills and blame us for things we didn’t do. Mom bought us some strange bibles and we had to study them at the kitchen table from right after breakfast until lunch time every day. Mom acts different from the other adults we know and doesn’t have any friends.

We don’t want to go back to her house anymore, but it is your court law for us to go. Can you have her come here for visitation?

~ Tracy and Lacy A.

Dear Judge,
plez com to my hows an talk to my parnts. we will all get drest nice an wrk hard to be good. i wont a hapie famble agn

~ yur frnd, Jamie L.

Dear Judge,
You are lucky to be the boss of the court. I don’t even get to be the boss of my bedroom because I have to share it with my big brother Lewis. When he is meen to me I call him old stinke head so he can not here me. If you can think of a way for me to be the boss of my room pleas send me a letter.

~ Sincerely,
Raymond O.
Don’t tell Lewis I sent this letter.

Dear Judge,
My mom and dad are real sorry they bothered you with our divorce. They are both tired of giving all their money to the lawyers. I think they can work things out now. So you can take our names off your list. We think you did a good job but you don’t know us very good.

~ Eugene E. ■



These letters have been edited and excerpted from the book *Dear Judge: Children’s Letters to the Judge* (Pale Horse Publishing, 2005), compiled by Charlotte Hardwick. This book is chock-full of how kids really feel about divorce, how they feel manipulated at times, and most importantly, how much smarter they are about things than most divorced parents give them credit. For more information, visit www.custodywar.com.

Child-Friendly Divorce

A checklist for parents to help foster a child's long-term adjustment to divorce.

By Diane M. Berry

There is much parents can do to foster children's long term adjustment to any major change in the family. If relationships are close, nurturing, supportive and dependable, they can buffer children from many of the blows inflicted upon them by stressors in their lives. Divorce is no exception.

We must remember that our goal as parents is not to prevent or protect our children from experiencing any stress, but to help make the stressors our children face moderate enough so they can tolerate and overcome them. This fosters the resilience that they need and we, as parents, seek to help them achieve.

There are four key ways to do this. These involve building good relationships with your children, developing open communication with them, stabilizing the home environment and limiting the amount of change in children's lives. The third, stability, is by far the most crucial to their long term adjustment.

Build Good Relationships with Your Children

- Spend time alone with your children
- Show children empathy and respect
- Reassure your children
- Be interested in their activities
- Support your children's relationship with their other parent
- Build your own support system

Create an Atmosphere of Open Communication with Your Child

- Listen to your child
- Put yourself in your child's place
- Tune into divorce related questions
- Accept their feelings

- Use emotional regulation to help yourself and your child
- Encourage them to talk
- Engage your child in an activity
- Stay available
- Share some of your own feelings
- Use a children's book to give them information about the divorce

Create a Stable Home Environment

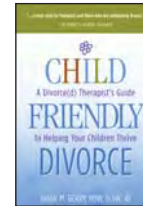
- Set up regular, organized routines
- Establish rules and limits
- Seek out other support people for your children
- Resolve the issues of custody and placement as quickly as possible
- Take children's developmental needs into account
- End parental conflict
- Support children's relationships with their other parent
- Encourage your child to assume age-appropriate responsibilities
- Resolve the reconciliation question quickly
- Get counseling for your child if necessary

Limit the Amount of Change in Your Children's Lives

- Give your child six months before making additional changes
- Make changes gradually
- Allow six months between major changes
- Continue familiar routines
- Give children time to prepare for changes
- Provide a positive focus

Take some time to go over the above checklist and think about how your children have been affected by your separation and divorce. At that point you can make some decisions about

changes you need to make to enhance their long term stability and security. ■



This article was excerpted with permission from the book Child-Friendly Divorce by Diane M. Berry, MSW, LCSW, JD, published by Blue Waters Publications,

LLC © 2004. Diane M. Berry, is a former family law attorney turned psychotherapist. She owns and operates a mental health clinic, practices therapy and, has been teaching the four-hour Parenting Through Divorce training.



How Counselling Helps Kids

By Shannon R. Rios

One-on-One Focused Time for Your Child

Spending time with a counselor provides your child with one-on-one time with an adult who is focused on them. This can be especially crucial if parents are struggling emotionally. When I work with children, we sometimes discuss and process difficult things. We also have fun together. I always spend some time with each child doing something that they enjoy doing. There is always time in my sessions where the child has complete control. Children can sometimes feel out of control during the divorce. Children thrive when they feel that they are the focus of the session and this is special time for them.

Someone to Share Their Feelings With

Children can share with counselors what they may be afraid to share with their parents. Your children may not want to share certain things with you for various reasons. The biggest reason is that they do not want to hurt you or your feelings. They want to protect you. Children are so amazingly intelligent. They have so many amazing thoughts and concerns going through their minds. You would not believe some of the concerns I have heard. I would never believe them had I not heard them directly from the children as I worked with them. Children may be afraid to share these concerns with you. They also may have been asked to keep secrets by one or both of their parents. Once your child trusts their therapist, they can share these concerns with the therapist. I tell all the children I work with that they can tell me anything and I will not share it with their parents unless it is a life-threatening situation and I have to tell. I do tell them that if I think we should share it with their parents, that we will discuss this. This gives children a lot of freedom in being able to work with me to process some deep fears. I want children to trust me because my goal as a therapist is to be there for them. If they can share something with me, and choose not to share it with their parents, I still believe that it is healthier because the child and I can process through the concern. They are able to release a lot of stress in sharing their fear with me. This promotes healthy development for your child.

REMEMBER that even if your divorce is going well, your children will still have fears and concerns that they may need to work through with a professional.

This does not mean that as a parent you have done anything wrong, it just means your child may have fears they feel they can't share with you. In one case, a little

boy told me, “I know I did not cause the divorce but what I do know is that my parents started fighting more once I was born.” So I said, “I will bet you a million bucks that if we ask your mom, she will say that was not true!” We had a deal. So we left my office and went to talk with his mom. The child was afraid to ask Mom so I asked if it was OK if I asked Mom and he said yes. Mom’s reaction was, “Oh no, we were so happy when you arrived! We had been waiting for so long for you to come.” The smile on this child’s face almost lit the room. The relief on Mom’s face was worth a million dollars.

Children’s fears relate to the unknown. Children need help sorting out what is real and what is not and what is true and what is not. Once children trust a counselor, they will sort these questions out with the counselor and get the relief that they need.

Child Feels Supported by Adult

Counseling is important for children because it allows them to feel completely supported during this time. Children feel that they have their own personal advocate who understands them, which is true. Many times I act as a mediator with parents and children, to help facilitate communication of worries and concerns. I assist parents to understand how they can better assist their child during this time. I recently worked with a teenage girl who expressed that she felt such a void at the end of her day because Dad was no longer there when she came home from school. We decided to share this with her dad and asked him to call her more frequently in the evenings. This worked and was a win-win solution for both of them.

If Parents Are Fighting, Counseling Can Provide a Place of Refuge

I heard a parent pose the following scenario to an adult counselor. He indicated that he and his ex-wife were fighting terribly. He asked if they should get counseling for their children. The

response from the counselor was, “Get help for yourself and your children will get better.” I do agree with that statement but I believe a large piece was missing. I felt that we were selling out on the children. First, the truth is that some parents don’t get better. Sometimes the fighting and pain continues for various reasons. If we can at least provide counseling support for the children, we can provide so much for them. Second, even if parents get counseling, their children will need someone as well. It is only fair for them to have their own focused time and process.

If you and your child’s other parent are fighting, an emotional war is being simultaneously waged within your child. They need someone to help them make sense of this internal war, someone who can help them see they don’t have to take sides in this divorce and that this divorce is not about them. Children know what is going on during this time, no matter how much you try to conceal your pain. Children become hypersensitive to everything during this time. Saying that your children do not need assistance as long as Mom and Dad have counseling is like saying your family’s ship is sinking and, as long as Mom and Dad get on a life boat, the children on the sinking ship will be OK, too. Don’t leave your children on the sinking ship. They need you to support them by finding an excellent professional for them to work with.

Just as you are figuring out the details of divorce with trained professionals (lawyers, mediators, and financial planners), your child needs to work with someone to assist them. This professional can help them take the easiest road possible through the quagmire of the divorce. We will discuss later how to look for the best professional possible.

Sometimes children who have had cooperative married parents have the toughest time with the divorce because they completely did not expect it. A friend of mine shared her story with me when I began this work. She and her ex-husband had gone through an amicable divorce seven years earlier. Because she was very aware and wanted her

children to be healthy through the divorce, she decided to have her children see a counselor even though it was a good divorce overall, as far as divorces go. The kids attended counseling and everything went well. Her children are now 14 and 16 years old. She recently overheard them talking and asked what they were discussing. They told her, “We were saying that we want to go to college and then work with children of divorce, like our counselor.” That statement is all the validation I need to know that the work I do as a counselor positively impacts children’s lives.

There is so much research out there now on the negative impact of divorce on children that not seeing a counselor seems irresponsible to me. Recently, a mother told me, I am spending so much money on attorneys, I just can’t afford for my child to see you. \$220 per hour for an attorney (a cheap one), and \$100 per hour for your child’s future. This seems like such an easy choice. In the end, a counselor’s bill is usually 1/10 of an attorney’s fees. Know that an investment in your child now will pay off through their future mental and physical health as they grow. If you choose to take some of the advice in this article, you will likely pay less in attorney’s fees, which can help pay for counseling for your child. Make the choice that makes the most sense for your child. Allow your child to move through this time in the healthiest way possible. ■



This article has been edited and excerpted from the book *The 7 Fatal Mistakes Divorced & Separated Parents Make: Strategies for Raising Healthy Children of Divorce*, permission by Shannon R. Rios, copyright © 2009 (Lifethreads Books).

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PARENTING RESPONSIBILITY ON YOUR OWN

By Dr. Philip Stahl

By doing the best job of parenting possible and taking personal responsibility for your role as a parent, you can meet your child's needs in the healthiest possible way.

When marriage ends, many parents struggle with feelings of anger and sadness, as well as potential feelings of inadequacy, making parenting a difficult task. When you were married, you likely had some parenting tasks that you did very well and others that you struggled with. Now, however, you must do all of the parenting tasks when your child is with you, and you might not always be as capable as you'd like. Parents in conflict tend to externalize blame and avoid looking inward when problems develop. You might blame your ex-spouse for any problems your child experiences, without realizing that it could be related to your own parenting. In trying to make up for the loss of the family unit, you may overindulge your child and try to buy her love. This is especially true for non-custodial parents, who often feel guilty about their limited time and involvement with their children.

Some divorced parents want to be friends with their child, losing sight of their duty to provide structure, guidance, and appropriate discipline. This may cause children to become manipulative, attempting to pit you against the other parent. They may also attempt to get you to interact with each other with the hope that you will reunite. Under such circumstances, it's easy to become insecure about your new role as a divorced parent. By doing the best job of parenting possible and taking personal responsibility for your role as a parent, you can meet your child's needs in the healthiest possible way.

Stop Worrying About Criticism from the Other Parent

One of the most frustrating things you may face in parenting after divorce is constant criticism from the other parent. Parents are at risk of being criticized about many aspects of parenting, including your child's bedtime, diet, activities, the manner in which you assist with school work, and your methods of discipline.

It's common for criticism by the other parent to increase when hostility during the divorce increases. The best way for divorced parents to interact is to question each other about their concerns. More typically, however, the criticism comes in the form of derogatory statements made to children, friends, relatives, or professionals working with the family. The most damaging aspect of such criticism is when it is voiced to your children. No matter how justified you feel in your anger, it's important to refrain from making negative statements about the other parent to your children.

It is also difficult to be on the receiving end of such criticisms. If someone is questioning your parenting techniques, you should first consider whether there is any validity to the criticism. If, however, you feel the criticism is baseless after some consideration, the key is to ignore it. Don't become defensive or

return the baseless criticism yourself – just ignore it. Thus, a two-pronged approach of thinking about the criticism and learning from your mistakes, in addition to ignoring baseless criticism, is the healthiest way to deal with criticism from the other parent.

If the criticism comes from your child, however, your job is more complicated. Becoming defensive only increases your child's exposure to the conflict; ignoring the criticism without comment, however, may lead your child to think that the criticizing parent is correct. The best solution when faced with criticism that comes through your child is to ask her how she feels about the issue, respond to her stated feelings, and encourage her to always express her feelings to you about your parenting.

Your best response in any situation is to follow up on your child's feelings and explain yourself. Stop and think about the impact of your parenting, respond to your child's feelings, and ignore the criticism from your ex-spouse. This will allow you to be an effective parent, and also help keep your child out of the middle of your divorce conflicts.

Take Self-Responsibility

Effective parallel parenting requires taking responsibility for your own parenting to do the best job you can, while ignoring your ex's parenting. Rather than focusing on your perception of inadequate parenting by your ex, it is critical that you pay attention to your own parenting job and attempt to improve it. If you focus on blaming the other parent, you are teaching your child to blame others for problems in his life. The best way to teach your

child to be responsible is to model self-responsibility as his parent.

Be a Parent, Not a Friend

When parents divorce, it is common for one or both to feel guilty about the breakup of the family. This guilt often causes parents to want to be a friend, rather than a parent, to their children, especially non-custodial parents who may have less time with their children than they would like. If you act too much like a friend, you are abdicating your responsibility as a parent. While parents have rules and structure, and encourage responsible behavior, a friend will be more likely to support immature behavior and irresponsibility.

One way to be a parent and a friend is to encourage your child to share his thoughts and feelings. Support your child's activities and interests, nurture your child, and be there in times of need. Often, the tendency of divorced parents is to ignore the responsibilities of being a parent and attempt to be a friend by overindulging him with things that he demands, providing few limits, and encouraging him to avoid maintaining a healthy relationship with the other parent.

Disciplining and Loving Your Child

The most effective discipline is given in a loving manner, and for children of divorce, this is especially critical. Research suggests that authoritative parenting is the healthiest form of parenting; it emphasizes nurturing and sensitivity to your child's feelings while simultaneously providing rules, structure, and reasonable discipline. Children whose parents have divorced may feel insecure about relationships. If your discipline is harsh, and not given



One of the most frustrating things you may face in parenting after divorce is constant criticism from the other parent

in a loving manner, your child may feel insecure about your love. Rather than telling your child what she can't do, tell her what you want her to do and why you want her to do it.

Discipline should be provided in a consistent, loving, and natural environment. Parents learn that natural consequences – where the *consequence* of one's behavior naturally flows from the *behavior itself* – are the most productive. Your child is more likely to learn from her mistakes if she is free to make the mistakes, and if the consequences for those mistakes make sense. This is preferable to a power struggle.

In addition to using natural consequences, it is also important to teach your child to learn from his mistakes. You can model this by apologizing for your mistakes and helping your child understand how and why you made them. Support your children in using verbal methods to understand differences and resolve conflicts. Interacting with the other parent in a responsible way demonstrates healthy conflict resolution skills that your children can put to use with their friends and siblings.

Another important aspect of discipline is setting reasonable structures in the home for mealtime, bedtime, school, homework, chores, and playtime. Don't overindulge your child because of your own feelings of guilt. Instead, encourage cooperation, responsible behavior, and healthy social interaction in your child. Be consistent in setting limits and follow through in order to maintain responsible discipline for your children.

Remember: the goal of discipline is to teach, *not to punish*. When you discipline your child, set limits, and tell her "no," you must also express your love. By disciplining your child in healthy ways, you're showing him that you

love him. Showing your child love and positive attention also reduces the need to punish him, allowing you to nurture his healthy development in social relationships.

Avoiding Your Child's Blackmail

When children of divorce spend time in two different homes, it is easy for them to pit one parent against the other. Your child might do this to encourage you and your ex-spouse to be in contact with one another in the hope that you get back together. However, your child can also become mercenary at times, demanding things from each of you. By saying things such as, "Dad will buy me that computer if I spend more time with him," or "Mom will let me go to the dance even if my homework isn't done," your child is, in essence, blackmailing you.

**Remember:
the goal of
discipline is to
teach, not to
punish.**

As a divorced parent, you shouldn't respond differently to blackmail associated with the other parent than you would with the parent of a friend. If you do, your child is more likely to use such blackmail in the future. Just as you'd deal with criticism from the other parent, the best solution is to ignore your child's blackmail, while still paying attention to his feelings. Make sure your child understands why you've made this rule, encourage and support responsible behavior on his part, and work toward resolving your differences. Keep in mind that some limit-testing behavior is to be expected and may not be related to anything that the other parent is doing.

It's important for you to be flexible. Rigid rules increase the possibility of a power struggle where there are no winners. If your child tries to change the rules, negotiate to see if a more flexible approach makes sense. If your child is willing to compromise, and you can be

flexible, it is possible to accomplish what you both want. This teaches your child that you're willing to talk out differences, attempt to resolve them, and find solutions that work for both of you. It is best if you have an initial structure and reasonable rules in your house, along with a willingness to be flexible. These standards will allow you to teach responsibility to your children while maintaining self-responsibility as parents. ■



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Parenting Pitfalls

Here are some of the most common warning signs that you need help before your children become casualties of your divorce.

By Dr. Elissa P. Benedek and Catherine F. Brown



The process of separation and divorce sets up an almost impossible situation for parents. At the same time that they need time out for themselves – to deal with the emotions and stress accompanying the loss of their marriage and to decide a new course of action – their children have the greatest need for reliability and assurances of love. Absorbed in their own problems, parents may become less affectionate with their children or fail to discipline them consistently. The more parents pull back to regroup after a divorce, however, the more fiercely children show their need for attention. When both parents and children have lost their emotional equilibrium, they exacerbate each other's problems.

The keys to breaking this cycle are for parents to:

- take control of their lives
- create a nurturing, predictable environment for the children
- learn to deal with the children

authoritatively

- be aware of some of the problems that divorced parents commonly encounter (as described later in this article).

Common Problems

When a husband and wife first separate and divorce, they experience the gamut of emotions from sadness, anxiety, guilt, shame, and shock, to elation over believing that all their problems are now solved. The spouse who didn't want the divorce may feel worthless and unlovable; the spouse who wanted the divorce may have second thoughts. There is no one order for these emotions; each may come and go again and again.

It's vitally important that parents overcome these reactions and, for the children's well-being, learn how to handle the stresses brought about by the divorce. The children's adjustment is directly linked to the adjustment of the parents.

Adult Regression

Children sometimes behave in ways typical of an earlier stage in their development in reaction to their parents' separation and divorce. In the same way, a keenly unwanted or brutal divorce has the potential for throwing an adult back into an earlier stage of development or leading to behavior that is unusual for that person. Some adults may go so far as to become helpless, depending on others – including their children – to take care of them.

Role Reversal

After a divorce, some parents experience a specific type of regression in which they become too dependent on one or more of their children. In essence, a role reversal takes place in which the children become the parents' caretakers, confidants, and counselors. These parents are most often troubled, depressed, and lonely; they are unwilling or unable to take responsibility for themselves. Sometimes, they are alcoholics or drug-addicted. The result is a form of mental bondage and skewed development in the child and a faulty sense of reality in the adult. In its most destructive (but thankfully rare) variant, some adults go so far as to commit incest, using the child as a replacement for the lost marital partner. More commonly, they have the child sleep with them to alleviate their loneliness.

The temptation to become too dependent on your children is always there if you don't have another adult to whom you can turn when you need advice or just someone to talk to. Although there's nothing wrong with soliciting your children's opinions in matters that concern them (in fact, doing so helps

build their sense of responsibility and family commitment), avoid relying on them for advice that affects only you or that should be offered only by adults. For example, it's all right to ask your children to help pick out the family's new car, but you should not ask them whether you should date someone you just met at work.

Overburdened vs. Idle

For many harried, overworked single parents, it's sometimes all too easy to fall into a routine in which they depend on an older child to care for younger siblings, or assign chores that require an unrealistic degree of responsibility.

Although it's not unreasonable for single parents to expect their children to carry some of the weight of household duties, such responsibilities should be assigned with certain limits, and the chores appropriate to the child's age.

Generally, children under the age of ten should not be left unsupervised. Older children should not be given total responsibility for the care of younger brothers and sisters. They are siblings – not substitute parents. Chores should not interfere with schoolwork or sleep, or preclude time with friends. Schoolwork is a child's most important job, and an active social life is a necessary ingredient of healthy development.

Instead of overburdening their children, some parents go too far towards the other end of the responsibility scale. To assuage their guilt over the divorce, these parents exclude the children from household tasks and try to do everything themselves. Or they may use such faulty reasoning as "I had to do too many chores when I was a kid. I don't want to put my kid through that." Such selfless intentions are unrealistic from

the parent's point of view and do a disservice to the child. Being assigned and expected to carry out age-appropriate tasks creates a sense of accomplishment and self-discipline in children. It's a training ground for handling increasingly more difficult demands that will be placed on them by school, other institutions to which they belong, and eventually, paying jobs.

Studies have shown that children with divorced parents reap unanticipated benefits from assuming a greater amount of responsibility at a young age. Many of these children report that they have a greater sense of strength, independence, and capability as a result of their experiences in a post-divorce family. They are clearly proud of themselves and of their ability to assist their parents at a time when the family's future was seriously jeopardized. Children whose parents are divorced – like all children – need to feel needed; thus, parents should not try to protect their children from the vagaries of everyday life. The danger comes when the children are robbed of their childhoods, forced to grow up far before they're ready. They can never recapture those years.

Isolation vs. Activity

In the immediate aftermath of divorce, many people follow one of two patterns: they either isolate themselves from others or pursue an overly- hectic social life.

People who choose isolation may do so for many reasons: they may not be able to afford a babysitter, or they may feel guilty about leaving their children with a sitter after being away from them at work all day. Although their

motivations are different, both types of parents may come to resent their children.

Some parents, however, use their work and/or their children as a handy excuse for avoiding interaction with others. They may still be sad and upset about the divorce – unable to put it behind them and take the first few shaky steps to reestablish their lives. They show no interest in dating, and may deny having sexual feelings.

Some people, overwhelmed by depression, may feel unable to make the effort to meet new people or take on new challenges. Such behavior often fosters over-dependence on the children, since they become the parent's only focus in life. What will become of such a parent when the children break away and establish their own lives? In its worst form, isolation may lead to severe depression and other psychological problems.

At the other end of the social spectrum are those parents who are any place but home. With a full schedule of night classes, church activities, outings with friends or dates, these parents leave their children with a round of babysitters and relatives (including the children's other parent). Some may go so far as to replace the former spouse with a serious new love interest before they are emotionally ready, or they frenetically engage in indiscriminate dating and sexual relationships. Sometimes, such parents are (subconsciously or not) trying to blot out the fact that they even have children, who are reminders of their failed marriage or a responsibility they wish they didn't have.

Obviously, the children suffer greatly by missing out on the consistent parenting and love they need, particularly in the first few months after their parents' divorce. Children's distress is compounded by the antics of an out-of-control parent and, not surprisingly,

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The temptation to become too dependent on your children is always there if you don't have another adult to whom you can turn when you need advice.

Forging the Path Ahead After Divorce

Life after divorce is about more than just surviving; allow yourself to learn from life's changes so you can thrive as an individual, and as a parent.

By Carolyn B. Ellis

Many would agree that parenting and divorce are two of life's biggest challenges. Many people would agree that being a parent is also one of life's biggest rewards and blessings. We learn so much about ourselves and what we are made of when we take on the responsibility to love and raise another human being.

I wonder how many people would join me in saying that getting divorced can also be one of life's biggest rewards and blessings. Please don't think that I'm an advocate for divorce and that more people should run out and get one. Not at all. What I am saying is if an intimate relationship is unhappy, unfulfilling, or even unsafe, divorce may be what's needed.

Rather than viewing divorce as a shameful admission of failure, I encourage you to shift your perspective to one of curiosity and wonder. Ask yourself if you're willing to wring every drop of wisdom and life lessons for yourself from your divorce experience? Are you willing to allow your divorce to open up a new kind of relationship with your children that's founded on conscious choice and partnership? Are you ready to take the bull by the horns and thrive after divorce?

Thrive after Divorce – Do It for Your Children

My children gave me the fuel I needed to heal from my divorce. Going through my divorce, I was definitely hurting and confused. Seeing the hurt and confusion in



my children's faces as I interacted with them in those early days woke me up and motivated me to do whatever it took to heal my heart so I could love them fully. I could see that if I shrank back from making tough decisions or denied my pain, I would pass on a heritage of denial and martyrdom to my children. I didn't want to leave that legacy. I would rather my children grow up with their own unique struggles and dramas and learn to solve them, rather than recycling or repeating their mother's emotional issues!

Children are the innocent victims of divorce. Whether it's through the divorce process itself or the cold war between ex-spouses that can ensue afterward, children pay the price – they pay the price in their self-esteem and their ability to create successful intimate relationships of their own. Some children act out their pain through lower academic achievement, falling in with the wrong peer group, using drugs, committing crimes, and more.

What kind of legacy do you want to leave your children now that you are divorced? The impact of how you raise your children goes even beyond your immediate family. Think of the ripples created when you drop a stone into a pond. The immediate circle is your biological family. Your children in turn have an impact on their friends and peer group. The ripples, in turn, affect the broader community and society in which we live.

Do you realize that how you raise your children has a huge impact that extends far beyond the current generation? What choices would you make in how you parent your children if you consider you are raising the parent of your grandchildren or the great-grandparent of your great-great-grandchildren?

Thrive after Divorce – Do It for Yourself

Ultimately, the most important relationship you need to cultivate and heal

is the one you have with yourself. Your relationship with yourself determines the quality of relationship you can have with anyone else. It profoundly affects the quality of the relationship you can have with your children as well.

Among my friends, I had the reputation of being a very compassionate person. People could count on me to listen and support them in any way I could. The divorce forced me to turn my lens onto myself; I was amazed at how little compassion, listening, and trust I had for myself. My divorce revealed to me how little responsibility I had assumed for my own well-being and happiness. I had been blindly putting the burden of my happiness and self-worth into the hands of other people: my children, my husband, my friends, and my work colleagues. One of the greatest gifts from my divorce has been to learn how to trust myself and to realize the only person who needed to approve of me was me!

Ultimately, we are the co-creators of our reality. You deserve to thrive and flourish after divorce. Try out these affirmations to help you live a full life post-divorce:

- **Trust:** I trust myself. I trust that everything happens for a reason. I trust that I can handle everything life brings me.
- **Honesty:** I am willing to tell the truth to myself and others. Honesty really is the best policy.
- **Responsibility:** I am responsible for my thoughts, words, and actions. I am responsible for my own self-care.
- **Integrity:** I do what I say. I say what I do. I am a person of my word.
- **Vision:** I am fueled and guided by the big picture I create for my life. I am willing to move toward my vision, even if I don't know "how" I will get there.
- **Expression:** I am committed to being my authentic self. I express all my emotions in healthy ways. I feel vital and alive.

Let's Make a Deal

If you've come this far, you are clearly motivated to make a change. Let's make a deal, shall we? Try some of the action steps. Simply allow yourself to experiment with them and try them on for a week.

If you don't notice a change in your mind-set or a feeling of lightness opening up inside your heart, you have a choice to make. You can continue on anyway, fueled by your vision, or you can always go back to your old ways. You may not be willing to give up some of these pitfalls right away. Progress is more important than perfection. The point is to become aware of these pitfalls and choose a different strategy that can better support you and your children.

The important thing is to simply start somewhere and take action. Get started today! I have no doubt you will see some great things starting to open up as a result. ■



This article has been adapted with permission from *The 7 Pitfalls Of Single Parenting: What to Avoid to Help Your Children Thrive After Divorce* by Carolyn B. Ellis (iUniverse, ©2007).

Carolyn B. Ellis is the founder of www.ThriveAfterDivorce.com and www.BrillianceMastery.com. She is an award-winning coach, transformational expert, and author. Combining her deep intuitive abilities with her Harvard-trained brain, Carolyn specializes in helping individuals navigate change and uncertainty by tapping into their own inner brilliance and emotional resilience. To learn more, visit www.ThriveAfterDivorce.com.

they often come to mirror that behavior back to the parent.

Moving On

In the first months to a year after separation and divorce, your life can be in a state of upheaval. When the dust finally begins to settle, however, there is the business of building a new life.

Your first task in this reconstruction is to put your failed marriage behind you and deal with any residual feelings of grief, anger, or guilt. In addition, you need to realize that your role as spouse is separate from your role as parent. Although your marriage has ended, your parenting relationship goes on.

That the children come to terms with the divorce has important consequences – not just in the period following the divorce but in their adult years as well. Children with divorced parents sometimes rush into relationships for which they are ill-prepared in an effort to prove they are lovable and to fight their fear of rejection. If they see that you can recover from such a devastating trauma, such reactions in their adult lives may be avoided.

Attaining an inner peace about your divorce partly depends on the quality of the relationship you and your ex-spouse are able to build as co-parents. If seeing or thinking about your ex-spouse is emotionally charged for you, you may need to monitor your attitudes and behavior towards your ex in front of your children. Remember, although the two of you were unable to continue your marital relationship, this has nothing to do with the right or ability of each of you to be a good parent to your children. ■

This article has been edited and excerpted from *How to Help Your Child Overcome Your Divorce* by Elissa P. Benedek, M.D. and Catherine F. Brown, M.Ed. Dr. Benedek is leading child psychiatrist and forensic expert. www.newmarketpress.com

“If I promise to be really good, will you get back together?”

“All kids show good and bad behavior sometimes. Being good or not good is not ever the reason parents get divorced. So, no, if you change your behavior, it won’t mean that we will get back together. So just keep being you, exactly like you are, because that’s who we love so much, no matter what.”

“Why did daddy leave us?”

“Daddy didn’t leave us. Daddy left the house. Daddy left the marriage. But Daddy did not, and will not, ever leave you.”

“Why don’t I see my cousin Rachel anymore?”

If it’s because of the parenting plan arrangement, an appropriate answer might be: “Sometimes after a divorce, because the kids don’t always see each parent all the time and on every holiday, the kids see less of certain family members, too. Maybe we can talk to Dad about getting you together with Rachel sometime soon.”

If it’s because a family member has “taken sides” against one parent and refuses to see that parent, a fitting response might be: “Sometimes a divorce can bring up strong feelings and opinions for other family members, and their anger or hurt makes them want a little space from the family. We’ll just have to wait and see what happens and we’ll try to talk to her later when she’s had some time to think about things.”

“Do I have to like mom’s new boyfriend?”

“Of course we can’t make you like someone, but we would like for you to give Mom’s new boyfriend a chance. It would be easier for everyone if it turned out that you liked him, even just a little bit, because he will be spending a lot of time with the family.”

“But if dad lets me do it, why can’t you?”

“People are different and parents are different, too. I know it’s hard to get used to following two sets of rules at the two different homes, but that’s just the way it is going to be. Just because Dad lets you do it isn’t a good enough reason for me to feel comfortable letting you do it.”

“When will dad stop acting like a jerk?”

“I can’t answer that. I don’t know why your dad says and does certain things. I can’t speak for your dad, but I think that if you feel that strongly about how he is acting, it’s important for you to talk to him about it.” ■

Dr. Lisa Rene Reynolds is a therapist specializing in marriage counseling and therapy with families going through divorce. She teaches a court-mandated divorce-parenting class for the State of Connecticut. This article has been excerpted from her book Still a Family: A Guide to Good Parenting through Divorce (Amacom, 2009).

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