# 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? How do I know if they're OK or struggling?

These are just a few of the many questions that parents must deal with during and after divorce. This special *Children and Divorce Guide* provides you with hand-picked articles, book excerpts, advice, and more. You'll find answers and insights to help you make wise decisions that are in the best interests of your children – and your family's future.

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# Dos and Don'ts

## When Telling Your Kids About Your Divorce

You and your co-parent must prepare in advance for this difficult conversation. For their sake, it's important to get on the same page – despite your differences – when breaking the news.

By Rosalind Sedacca, Divorce & Parenting Coach

The trauma of divorce is greatly compounded when children are involved. For that reason, telling kids about your divorce is a very serious matter. This conversation should not be taken lightly.

### Tips on Telling Your Kids About Your Divorce

Preparing for the tough "break the divorce news" conversation in advance is crucial to a successful outcome. Inevitably this conversation will bring up many fears and insecurities for your children. Consequently, there are several vitally important questions both you and your partner need to address and answer before you have this conversation:

- How and when should we broach the subject?
- How much should we share during and after the initial conversation?
- How will our children react?
- How do we handle their questions?
- What do the experts recommend?

You also must be prepared for questions your children will ask. These will depend a great deal on their age and how prepared they are for the divorce revelation. Children living with high parental conflict or emotional turmoil at home for years or months may not be surprised by this discussion.

Kids who are very young or were distanced from the discord at home may experience a form of shock and have a harder time accepting this dramatic news. Adapt your words to your family dynamics. Put yourself on the same page, despite your differences, when talking to them.

**Children are likely to ask questions about how the divorce will ultimately affect them:**

- Where will I be living?
- Will I still go to the same school?
- Will I have to leave my friends?
- Will I still see mom and dad?
- What will happen over summer vacation?

You don't have to have all the answers to these questions at the time of the divorce talk. But you should be prepared with as many reassurances as you can offer. If your child will be staying in the same home or neighborhood, telling them they will still see their friends and attend the same school will be very reassuring.

If they will be relocating out of the area, the conversation will be more difficult and complex. Find ways

of boosting their sense of security by reminding them they will be with one or both parents. It may help to let them know they will be living closer to a relative or have greater access to something they like, such as a sports team, beach, or famous zoo.

Be prepared to listen closely to what your child says, even if you don't like what you hear. Don't dismiss their emotional response. Instead, acknowledge their feelings and tell them you *hear* them. Assure them you and their other parent are working on making this transition as smooth as possible.

Children need reassurance more than anything at this time. This includes hugs, expressions of love and support, caring feedback, and compassion. Put yourself in your kids' shoes before you respond to anything.

As the author of *How Do I Tell the Kids About the Divorce?* (and a divorced parent myself), I know the anxiety parents feel when having this crucial conversation. No one wants to make errors they will regret, yet all too often, I see parents making the same serious mistakes. These mistakes can have long-term effects on innocent children for years to come.

## Avoid Making These Mistakes

Here is a brief overview of six of the most common mistakes that every parent should avoid.

### 1 Bashing Your Ex to or Around Your Kids

When you speak disrespectfully about your children's other parent, the kids are often hurt, confused, and riddled with guilt. Their thinking is, "If there's something wrong with Dad or Mom, there must also be something wrong with me for loving them." This can damage your own relationship with your children.

### 2 Fighting Around the Children

Studies show that conflict creates the most pain and turmoil for children of divorce. Keep parental battles away from your children – even when they're sleeping or you're on the phone. Hearing confrontations they can't personally resolve is frightening and disempowering for children. It robs them of their childhood innocence. It also boosts their levels of frustration – since they're helpless to change the circumstances around them.

### 3 Pressuring Children to Make Difficult Choices

Most kids feel torn and confused when asked to choose between their parents. It's a no-win situation. Often they lie to please one parent and feel guilty about the other. Don't put them in that position.

**Children need reassurance more than anything at this time. This includes hugs, expressions of love and support, caring feedback, and compassion.**

### 4 Not Stressing Their Innocence

Don't assume your children understand that they are victims in your divorce. Remind them frequently that they bear no blame in any way related to your divorce – even and especially if you are fighting with their other parent about them. It is not their fault!

### 5 Confiding Adult Information to Your Kids

Parents often do this to bond with their children. They also try to win their child's allegiance or to alienate them from their other parent. This strategy often backfires in later years. Don't blame your ex for your divorce when talking to your kids, even if you feel it's justified. It creates an emotional burden that children shouldn't have to bear. Vent your anger and frustration to your friends, your coach, or your therapist!

### 6 Using Your Kids as Messengers or Spies

Don't ask and expect your kids to relay messages to their other parent. Instead, use an online co-parent scheduling program for those communications. And never turn them into spies, by asking them to share information about their other parent's life and home. This makes children feel uncomfortable and puts enormous pressure on them. Often they make up lies you want to hear. In time, they'll resent you for it.

Fortunately, you can reach out to divorce professionals locally or online who can support you, especially if you lack confidence about how best to approach your children. Speak to a divorce coach or see a therapist who specializes in this subject.

Seek out an attorney who practices mediation or Collaborative Law, which usually results in more positive, cooperative outcomes. Get advice from parenting coaches, school counselors, clergy, and other professionals. Don't forget the many valuable books, e-courses, and articles on this topic.

Whatever you do, prepare yourself in advance before telling your kids about your divorce. Understand the impact of your words and tone on their innocent psyches. Avoid the mistakes we have discussed. Think first about the consequences before taking any action. That will give your family a stronger, more stable foundation on which to face the changes ahead with security, compassion, and love. ■

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*Rosalind Sedacca, CDC, is a Divorce and Parenting Coach and founder of the Child-Centered Divorce Network. Rosalind's free ebook on Post-Divorce Parenting, information about her online coaching services, and other valuable resources for parents are available at* www.childcentereddivorce.com

# Should You Wait Until the Children are Older to Get Divorced?

The challenges your children will face during your divorce will vary based on their age. So should you wait, or is it better to split now – especially if you are in a high-conflict marriage?

By Dr. Deanna Conklin-Danao, Clinical Psychologist

It's common for unhappy couples to stay together because they believe that it's better for their kids to grow up with two parents in the household. Inevitably, this leads to many divorces occurring as soon as those kids leave for college – a phenomenon so common that it's now known as "the freshman call."

For couples with children, there actually is no ideal time to get a divorce. However, staying in an unhappy marriage where children are exposed to conflict or apathy is no gift to anyone. If both parents want to stay together, they should focus on making the marriage healthy again through couples therapy. However, if both sides realize that the marriage is over, it's better for the entire family to end the marriage constructively.

From a development perspective, divorce offers different challenges for kids based on their age. Here are some considerations for different stages of development.

## Divorcing with Infants

The infancy period is a time when children are developing an attachment to their primary caregiver. This is the relationship that will be the foundation for their future relationships. Divorcing parents need to work as a team so that their infant children develop a strong attachment to their primary caregiver while also building a strong relationship with the other parent.

## Divorcing with Toddlers

Toddlers need consistency and physical contact to feel loved and secure. Frequent contact with both parents is ideal rather than going long periods without seeing one parent (although this doesn't necessarily mean frequent transitions between houses). Toddlers have more language than infants but cannot understand complicated adult relationships, so explanations about the divorce should be short and clear.

## Divorcing with Preschoolers

Preschoolers don't understand the concept of divorce. They believe that loving someone means being with them. When their parents do not live together, they may fear they are no longer loved. Also, a lot of complex feelings are beginning to emerge (guilt, anger, embarrassment, worry, sadness, loss) that a toddler can't fully understand or express. Encourage children to share questions and concerns about divorce and provide honest answers, with age-appropriate information. Parents should expect regressed behavior (sleep issues, toileting accidents, etc.) and renewed separation anxiety (clinging behaviors, especially around transitions).

## Divorcing with Young School-Aged Children

School-aged children understand and experience divorce in a more sophisticated manner; however, they still require significant support to help them manage this life change. These children have a clearer understanding as to how divorce will affect their lives (e.g., moving across two different households, potentially changing schools, impact on extracurricular activities, etc.) and can adapt to co-parenting more easily than younger kids.

However, this understanding can make them feel that their lives are outside of their control. Parents can help their children regain a sense of control by allowing them to provide input in decisions that will affect their lives. The input allows parents to understand what matters to their kids.

## Divorcing with Preteens

Children in this age group have rigid moral views (as you know if you have ever played a board game with a 10-year-old). They also have unique social concerns and worldviews that need to be taken into consideration to help them cope with the changes that accompany divorce. This growing awareness of social interactions often leads preteens to be embarrassed by their parents' divorce.

Instead of being defensive about their embarrassment, use this as an opening for a conversation about their feelings and what about the divorce worries them. Preteens will often react with either anger or by withdrawing. They need increased monitoring to make sure they do not turn to risky behavior (substances, eating issues, sexual activity, cutting, etc.) to cope.

## Divorcing with Teenagers

The unique aspects of the teen years make divorce even more difficult for kids to process. Teenagers are working to separate themselves from their parents and develop their own identity. In order to keep this process on track during or after a divorce, there are some concrete things you can do. Asking teenagers to be adults is an unfair burden; they need to devote time and energy to their own development (activities, friends, school, jobs, etc.).

For girls, being "parentified" can look like too many caretaking responsibilities or becoming one spouse's confidant. For boys, it can look like "being the man of the house" (this pressure can be felt from both parents, not just from moms).

Be flexible and consider allowing friends to occasionally join in visitation activities so that teens don't feel they have to miss out on social time to have family time. As with preteens, teens also need additional supervision to make sure they are not engaging in risky behavior.

## Divorcing with College-Aged Kids

While most of the concerns regarding the impact of divorce on children are focused on younger children living at home, divorce also impacts young adults. With the news of divorce, the idea of "home" may be lost. Your child may worry that he won't have a place to go to over the break or be sad about the loss of his childhood home. There can also be feelings of guilt ("I could have helped my parents more") and shock. One study found that college-aged kids often romanticized their parents' relationship and felt they grew up in the perfect "all-American family."

For these kids, the news of an impending divorce can be a complete surprise. Another common reaction is for college-aged kids to become cynical about their own relationships, especially romantic relationships. They think, "If I thought my parents were fine, what else do I not know?"

## Should You Wait Until the Children Are Older to Get Divorced? It Depends…

Divorce challenges vary based on the age and developmental stage of your child(ren). Also, each child has a unique personality and history that they bring to the experience. Engaging in an alternative dispute process (such as mediation or Collaborative Divorce) can help co-parents create a parenting plan that suits their unique situation, and utilizing the experience of a divorce coach or child therapist can help parents navigate the divorce process in a way that protects their child's development – whatever age they may be. ■

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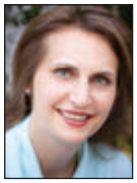

*Dr. Deanna Conklin-Danao (Psy.D.) has been in practice for over two decades. After working with adolescents at a major hospital, she opened a private practice to serve children, adults, and families in 2006. Her experience and training allow her to work effectively as a divorce coach and therapist.*

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# How to Create a Successful Parenting Plan

A comprehensive parenting plan helps parents avoid future battles so that parenting disagreements don't escalate into open warfare. While they can't anticipate every possible conflict, a good parenting plan can identify likely issues and provide a roadmap for handling them.

By Dr. Ann Buscho,
Licensed Clinical Psychologist

In my work with divorcing clients over the past 25 years, I've learned many things I wish I'd known myself when I got divorced in the early 1990s. For instance, I wish I'd known that being a single mom was more complicated than it looks. I also wish I'd known how to create a successful parenting plan and co-parenting relationship with my ex.

In my work since then, I have focused on helping parents establish safe and healthy co-parenting relationships. Parents can anticipate issues that will predictably arise and have a documented plan as to how to deal with them. The best way to do this is to create a written co-parenting plan with explicit agreements that both parents support.

Often these plans are attached to and filed with the final divorce papers.

## Why You Need a Parenting Plan

Traditionally, the parenting plan has been about child custody and the legal authority to make decisions on behalf of the children. This bare-bones plan does little to support a healthy co-parenting relationship during the initial period of separation and post-divorce.

Research has shown us that the single most harmful aspect of a divorce for children is parents in conflict. Conflict and fighting hurts kids when it continues after the divorce is over. Many adult children of divorce will confirm this. Even when parents feel that they shield the children from conflict, children will absorb the parents' stress. A child once told me that he could tell when his mom and dad had been arguing by how his mom hugged him. Children have sensitive conflict radar detectors and are keen observers.

Given the research, I have found that a more comprehensive and detailed parenting plan can help parents avoid future battles. With such a plan, co-parenting disagreements or skirmishes will not escalate into conflicts. Like a peace treaty, a good parenting plan cannot anticipate *every* possible conflict – but it *can* identify likely issues and provide a roadmap for handling issues that are not easily resolved. Working together, the parents create the plan, frequently with the help of a divorce or parenting coach to work out all the details. The plan is unique to each family and anticipates many of the issues that will predictably arise; it can be revised as the family lives with the plan and the children grow older.

## Creating a Successful Parenting Plan

Sometimes parents turn to a therapist to facilitate this conversation. The therapist can share child development and divorce research as well as his or her clinical experience. This information helps parents consider their decisions. Over time, parents may revisit the parenting plan if family circumstances change. If the parents are communicating well, there are tools online to help them create their own plan.

A former client, Stephanie, called me recently. She let me know how glad she was that she and her ex had made an agreement about how and when their children would be informed of any new relationships. Four years ago, when she and her ex were developing the plan, I coached them to discuss this issue. The topic brought up painful emotions for both of them and they were reluctant to talk about it. They agreed that if a parent was in a committed, long-term relationship, that parent would inform the other parent before telling the children. They also agreed that it was the right of the parent in the new relationship to tell the children.

Stephanie said to me, "I am so glad that we agreed to this even though I didn't get the point of it when we divorced. If my kids had come home to tell me their father was getting married before he had let me know, I would have been so upset. My kids would have had to see my shock or anger. Because he had already told me, I'd had time to digest the information. I was more able to help my kids process the news." Dealing with new relationships is just one of a number of topics that are included in a good parenting plan.

## What Is Included in the Plan

A parenting plan includes a detailed schedule: it spells out which parent is "on duty" and which is "off duty" on a particular day. The plan is tailored to each family's needs. Taking into account their work schedules, the parents develop a basic time-sharing calendar. I encourage parents to talk about exceptions, such as holidays, birthdays, summer planning, travel with or without the children, and family traditions. The parents decide who holds the passports, who is the liaison with doctors, the schools, etc.

Parents often want to include agreements about screen time, school activities, and religious education. They discuss extracurricular activities, medical decisions, decisions about driving, sleepovers, parties, and more. Parents often discuss and make agreements about communication with the children when off duty. They discuss discipline, rules at each home, and the children's chores. We craft agreements around parents' use of alcohol or drugs, particularly when the children are present. We discuss extended family relationships and how the parents will support those relationships.

Most importantly, parents make agreements about their communication, and how and what information is shared. They make agreements about boundaries and privacy. Many other topics may be included, depending on the needs of the family.

## What if a Problem Comes up Later?

Parents should agree on what they will do when they cannot resolve a future disagreement. For example, they may agree that either of them can request the assistance of a neutral therapist or mediator. The other parent agrees to attend, and the parent initiating the assistance pays for the first meeting.

Parents who nest (or "birds-nest") during the transition to divorce will also be much more successful with a nesting parenting plan. A nesting plan will likely include many of the above topics, as well as unique topics such as finances and care of the home.

If both parents fully participate in crafting a written agreement, the plan will help to stabilize the children and family post-divorce. The parenting plan is one of the essential tools of a successful co-parenting relationship, and having a plan is one of the best ways to help your children adjust and heal. ■

*Dr. Ann Buscho, Ph.D., is the author of* The Parent's Guide to BirdNesting: A Child-Centered Solution to Co-Parenting Your Children During Separation and Divorce *(Adams Media). Her mission is to help parents divorce respectfully and to stay out of court to protect their children.*
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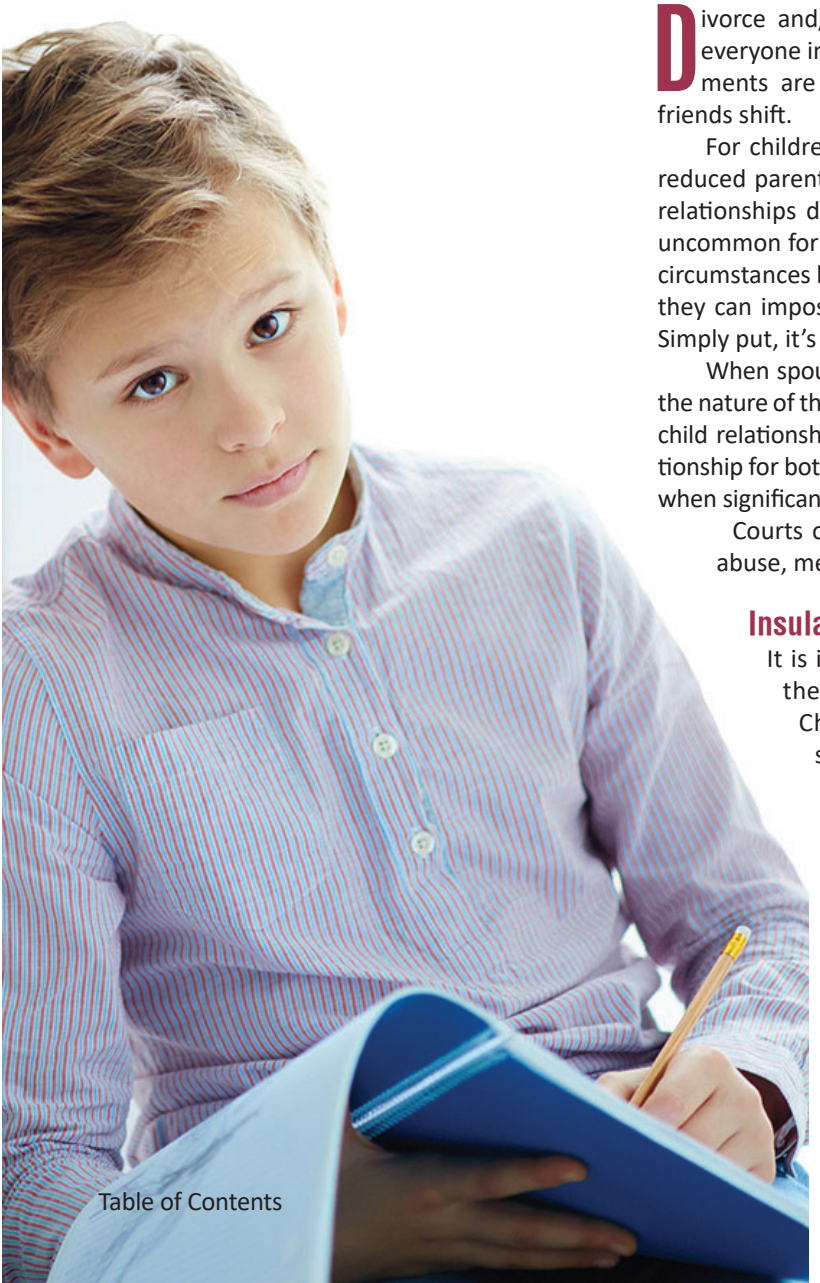
# Divorce-Related Psychological Issues

By Henry S. Gornbein, Family Law Attorney, and Dr. Jack P. Haynes, Forensic Psychologist

The psychological effects of divorce on children largely depend on the feelings and behavior of the parents. In general, the longer and more intense the parental conflict the children observe, the higher the likelihood for continuing problems.



Divorce and/or permanent separations are unavoidably disruptive to everyone in the family unit. Living circumstances and financial arrangements are altered. Often, supportive relationships with family and friends shift.

For children, the end of cohabiting parental relationships may mean reduced parental income to support them and disrupted peer and family relationships due to changes in residence and school locations. It is not uncommon for children to lose focus on academics or sports if their home circumstances have changed substantially. Even when changes are positive, they can impose stress on children because change requires adjustment. Simply put, it's stressful for everyone.

When spousal abuse ise part of the motivation to divorce, it can affect the nature of the post-divorce relationship of the adults as well as the parent-child relationship. Abuse is a negative complication to a positive post-relationship for both adults and children. Negative outcomes also are more likely when significant mental illness and substance abuse are present.

Courts often use the help of professionals to assess the effects of abuse, mental illness, and/or substance abuse on children.

## Insulate Children from Stressors

It is important to try to insulate children from stressors during the divorce process as well as during the post-relationship. Children should not be informed or knowledgeable about spousal conflicts and shortcomings, the legal process or strategies, settlement issues, or even court dates. These issues are beyond the ability of a child to process and can divert attention from normal child development. Not shielding children from such stressors may – depending on their age – cause them to regress, display isolative behavior and sadness, become more irritable and disruptive, or exhibit symptoms of tiredness or sleep difficulties.

Typical custody determinations are final. Families move forward with their changed circumstances, using court orders as their guidelines. There is usually no need for continued court involvement. However,

sometimes circumstances change and modifications are necessary. This may require a return to court involvement.

Sometimes, modification of custody arrangements may be less arduous than the initial custody determination, though that may depend on how the living circumstances have changed. All of these factors can bring about a lot of psychological issues for parents *and* children.

## Psychological and Social Adjustments

Effects of adjustments on adults and children in contested custody situations are predominantly psychological and social in nature, depending on the specific changes. Examples of potential adjustment areas are who lives with whom, how often the children see each parent, and what sorts of experiences they have with each parent in the new circumstances.

The post-divorce effects on children depend in great measure on the feelings and behavior of the adults. Parents who continue to be embittered about the ended relationship are more likely to have a negative effect on their children.

In general, the longer and more intense the conflict as observed by the children, the higher the likelihood for continuing problems. Parents who can relate to each other reasonably and work together post-divorce are more likely to facilitate the positive adjustment of their children to new circumstances.

The nature of the relationship between children and parents before the breakup typically is also related to the quality of the post-divorce adjustment of parents and children. The continuity of a positive relationship is a significant predictor of good adjustment, even though the divorce process can, of course, be disruptive.

Another very important aspect of post-divorce child adjustment is the extent to which both parents are committed to the importance of the children and their developmental and emotional needs.

## Quality Time Involves a Quantity of Time

It would seem that a major goal of post-divorce parent-child relationships requires sufficient parenting time. There is likely no magic in brief but intense post-divorce parent-child contact. To a certain extent, quality of time necessarily includes some quantity of time. Regularity and predictability of contact are also important.

It is also helpful to have some involvement by both parents in routine and repeating events, despite separate living circumstances, if that is possible. Examples include parents jointly participating in school and other extracurricular events, medical care, meeting and being familiar with the friends of the children, extended family involvement by the children with both sides of the family, sharing some holiday or birthday meals, and agreement on waking and bedtime patterns and rituals.

Involvement and consistency by both parents provide a healthy structure for the child. This requires maturity and for both parents to set aside some of their differences.

## Moving Between Houses Can Be Stressful

Transitioning from one household to another involves some degree of stress for most children, given these changes are done on a timeline established by adults – not by the children themselves. It is not uncommon for a child to show signs of upset or reluctance to leave one household for another, to the point of protesting with sadness, anger, or tears.

It also is not uncommon for a child entering the other household to exhibit signs of withdrawal, isolation, and reluctance to reengage with the other parent. This pattern can be repeated at transition times, even when both parents are attempting to do their best. Such reactions from children do not mean the arrangement is bad nor is it an indication that things are not working out at one of the households. Children just need time to adjust.

Adjustment time is important whether the parent-child co-parenting time is frequent or if it is less frequent because of a relocation by one parent. Parents do not always maintain exactly the same rules in both households, which is part of the stress for children and another reason why they need time to adjust. But it is important for there to be as much consistency of parental expectations as possible between the two households.

## Seize the Day

More research needs to take place to better understand the characteristics of positive parent-child relationships. In this regard, it is important for both parents to keep the focus on the best interests of their children.

By definition, time is passing and limited – the children are growing older and there is less parent-child time available because it is now split between the parents. As the saying goes, "Seize the day!" Enjoy your time with your child.

## Takeaways

Divorce – or child custody disputes when a non-marital arrangement ends – means a myriad of changes that are stressful for both parents and children. Parents can do a lot to help smooth the process for children, shield them from the messy adult parts, and make the unavoidable disruptions in households and daily routines as palatable as possible. ■

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*This article has been edited and excerpted from* Child Custody: A Complete Guide for Parents *(Momentum Books, 2020) by Henry S. Gornbein, Esq., and Jack P. Haynes, Ph.D. Practicing for more than 40 years, Henry Gornbein is a leading expert in family law who has written extensively on divorce-related topics. Dr. Haynes is a distinguished and highly respected psychologist with more than 40 years of forensic psychological experience.* www.amazon.com/Child-Custody-Complete-Guide-Parents/dp/1938018222

# 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.**

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, stomach aches, 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.

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

## 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!

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. Court systems across the United States commonly accept this course to fulfill requirements regarding divorce education for parents

*Based in Ashland, OR, the Center for Divorce Education (CDE) is a 503(c)(3) non-profit corporation founded in 1987 by a consortium of attorneys and psychologists.* www.online.divorce-education.com.

# 8 Tips to Help Your Teen Cope with Post-Divorce Challenges

Be sure to establish an open dialogue with your teen, so they can discuss the stresses in their life and brainstorm solutions with you.

By Terry Gaspard, Licensed Therapist and Author

Helping your teenager make a smooth transition to becoming a more capable and independent person can be complex in a divorced family. Experts explain that adolescence is a time of transition from being a child to establishing an identity different from their parents. This normal process can become more complicated as teens experience the breakup of their parents' marriage.

Although it may take your teen about two years to adjust to your divorce, feelings of sadness or anger may reappear during stressful times, such as taking exams or if you or your ex-spouse remarry. In the 21st century, the teen years can be more problematic for many due to academic pressures, online bullying, and parents working long hours.

Some of the challenges teens face after their parents' divorce include: living in two homes (with different rules in each house), loyalty conflicts with their parents, moving, and dealing with their parents dating as they're exploring intimate relationships. They might also need to adjust to one or both parents' remarriage, step-siblings, and/or a new "mutual" sibling born to their biological parent and a stepparent.

## Warning Signs of Psychological Issues

One of the main warning signs that your teenager is having difficulty coping with your divorce is if they display intense mood swings, ranging from extreme elation to intense hostility toward others, that last more than a few days. Also, they might rage toward others and overreact to triggers in their environment. This could be anything from temper tantrums (especially in public) to becoming exceedingly angry or irritable over small things.

Other warning signs of depression or psychological problems include radical changes in behavior, such as fighting at school, cheating, stealing, lying, or intense arguments with others (teachers, friends, or you or their other parent), declining school performance for over a period of a few weeks, developing physical ailments or chronic complaints (such as stomach or headaches), sleep problems, eating disorders (or gaining or losing more than ten pounds when not trying to), changes in peer relationships (such as losing friends or isolating themselves from social activities), and sadness that lasts more than a few days.

Unfortunately, it doesn't matter how many times you reassure your teenager that they aren't to blame for your divorce. Far too often, they will internalize your breakup and carry the burden of guilt. Be aware that feelings of shame, resentment, frustration, or anger might surface during times of high stress, such as moving, going off to college, or adjusting to a new stepparent or stepsibling. This is true even if your adolescent was coping fairly well prior to your divorce.

## Tips to Help Your Teenager Cope

1. **Set a good example by managing your own stress and mood post-divorce.** If you aren't handling things well, your teen could be negatively impacted, especially if you are their rock. Go to the gym or take a power walk and invite your teen to join you. Seek out supportive friendships and counseling (if needed), so you can stay optimistic about your future.

2. **Be available to listen and validate your teen's concerns.** When kids feel valued by their parents, they will value them in return. Teenagers are under a lot of stress at school and in peer relationships, so they need you to be available to listen. Turn off your cell phone when you're with him or her. If you must take a call, keep it short and apologize if it interfered with your time together.

3. **Don't bad mouth or argue with your ex in front of your teen.** Model self-control and be polite with your former spouse. Negative comments about his/her other parent are likely to cause teens to experience loyalty conflicts – which can lead to emotional pain and turmoil.

4. **Set good boundaries.** Be careful not to share too many details about your divorce with your teenager. Don't grill them with questions about the other parent! This will create intense loyalty conflicts and put a lot of stress on your teenager.

5. **Promote a healthy bond between your teen and their other parent and/or stepparent.** It's crucial to have a positive mindset about your teen's relationship with their other parent and perhaps their stepparent. This is especially true if your teen has a stepmother and is a daughter, because those relationships can be challenging.

6. **Be flexible.** Keep in mind that teens need some control over their schedules, so be flexible about "Parenting time." Don't say or do things to make them feel guilty when they want to spend time with their other parent or friends and it's a time they are scheduled to be at your home.

7. **Set limits with love.** Many parents complain that their teens are rarely home once they begin to drive or work. Remember, you are the parent and need to set a positive tone for your household, including having expectations for behavior, chores, curfew, etc.

8. **Be mindful of warning signs of teen depression and seek professional help if needed.** Adolescence is often a time of turmoil, which is exacerbated by the multitude of changes that go along with parental divorce. If your teen exhibits any of the above warning signs for more than a few weeks, seek professional help.

Experts agree that friends, school, extracurricular activities, and jobs are all crucial to a teenager's well-being. Being flexible in your parenting schedule allows your teen to enjoy the things that are essential for his or her life. Operating from a mindset that they need balance in their life will serve as a protective factor during the whirlwind of adolescence. Your teen might end up feeling disappointed or resentful if you try to get them to adhere to your expectations or if you are too rigid.

According to divorce and co-parenting expert Rosalind Sedacca, if you've built a healthy foundation with your teenager prior to your divorce, it's likely that they'll be resilient and adjust to your breakup. When you take time to truly listen to your adolescent, they'll be more likely to ask your advice when they have a problem. Sedacca writes: "How you handle this now will affect your long-term relationship with her. So, don't stand on your soap-box. Show her your empathy, compassion, and the ability to turn the other cheek."

During and after divorce, it's important that both parents promote a healthy bond with their teenagers in order to nurture high self-esteem and resilience. Showing your teen compassion and understanding won't guarantee success every day, but they'll feel less stressed as a result. Be sure to establish an open dialogue with your teen so they can discuss the stresses in their life and brainstorm solutions with you. ■

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# PARENTING RESPONSIBLY ON YOUR OWN

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.

By Philip Dr. Stahl

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.

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

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

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 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 are 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.

As a divorced parent, you should not 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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# HOW TO HELP YOUR CHILDREN AVOID THE LANDMINES OF DIVORCE

Protect your children from the destruction of a high-conflict divorce by putting kids first, managing your own emotions, and staying out of court.

By Dr. Ann Buscho, Licensed Clinical Psychologist

Divorce is a minefield, and the children are the most vulnerable to injury. I have spent a lifetime trying to protect children and reduce the harm from a contentious divorce. Here are my top tips – beginning with taking litigation in court off the table.

## Tip 1 Take Going to Court off the Table (if Possible)

Sixty-four years ago, when I was five, my parents divorced. My dad is 95 and still carries the anger and pain from that experience. They were in and out of court until my sister and I were 18. Then there was nothing legal left for them to fight about. Like an addiction, they fought and continued to fight despite the fact that neither of them would ever win.

Even when the court battles ended, they continued to hate each other and to share those feelings with us. My sister and I always felt we had to choose sides. We were pulled to align with and protect one or the other parent. We looked for which parent to blame. The conflict of the divorce had driven my father to leave the state of

Michigan where we lived. He decided to move to California.

I once talked with him about this abandonment. My father showed me papers from the "Friend of the Court" in Michigan. He wanted to prove to me that he did fight for more time with me and my sister. Recently I looked up what the Friend of the Court does. I learned that one of its jobs is to settle disputes between parents during and after the divorce regarding custody, parenting time, and child support. The Friend also makes sure that parents obey court orders regarding custody, parenting time, and child support.

In my parents' case, the Friend of the Court had his work cut out for him. He failed on all counts. The vicious cycle never let up. My mother defied the court order regarding custody and prevented our Dad from seeing us. In retaliation, my father did not pay his court-ordered child support of $25 per week. Or from Mom's perspective, Dad would not pay his child support, so she didn't see why he should have visits with us. For the next 45 years, until my mother died, they continued to spew venom about each other to us. Even after my mother died, my father continued to call her by his favorite pet name for her, "the nightmare." One day, not that long ago, I asked him to stop.

## Everyone Knows a Bad Divorce Is Bad for Kids

Everyone knows that this kind of divorce is bad for kids. Litigation is bad for kids, but some divorcing parents simply cannot resolve their differences. The judge knows almost nothing about them or their children, yet he gets to make decisions that will affect the family for years. And since there is always a "winner" and a "loser," the court becomes a revolving door – until the parents either run out of money or simply give up. But it doesn't have to be that way. Alternative dispute resolution processes, such as mediation and collaborative practice, help parents get to a "win-win" resolution.

## Tip 2 Deal with Your Own Emotions

Easier said than done, right? This is where self-care comes in. Talk to friends or a therapist (not your kids). Take walks in nature, or learn to meditate for just five minutes a day. Develop a gratitude practice and journal every day. Pray. Exercise and eat well. Find things you enjoy and do at least one of them every day. Think about your "ustas" – maybe you used to do art or yoga or run marathons. This is a good time to reclaim the things you "usta do" that you enjoyed.

I am sure that my parents' divorce and ongoing conflict set me up to be a psychologist. And it's not surprising that I specialize in helping families divorce differently. But the rage, fear, and disappointment that comes with the end of a marriage makes some people still want "their day in court." They want to prove that the other parent is at fault, sick, crazy, or evil.

Sadly, this rage is a way that people avoid dealing with their more painful and vulnerable emotions. They may allege that the other parent is an addict, abusive, narcissistic, or dangerous. For these parents, who have not come to terms with their own emotions and the parts they played in the collapse of the marriage, the children become the trophies or the spoils of the warfare.

It is painful to see these battles, knowing the scars that such warfare will leave on the kids. Some years ago I realized that my court-involved adversarial clients were literally making me sick. My stomach was in knots at the end of the day. I finally made the decision to refer these kinds of cases to my colleagues.

Instead, I focus on the parents who want to put their children first and stay out of court. These are not simple or easy cases. These are parents with rage, grief, guilt, and fear. But they are willing to work through those emotions. They choose to commit to resolving their conflict without a court battle. It is important to them to continue to co-parent after the divorce is finished. Their motivation is not to defeat the other parent, but to do what is best for their children.

## Tip 3 Make Your Kids' Well-being Your Top Priority

Twenty-five years ago, my soon-to-be-ex and I struggled to set aside our own feelings for the sake of our children. We agreed to bird's nest custody, alternating time with our children who stayed in the family home while we each

found places to stay when we weren't with our children. We maintained this arrangement for over a year until our divorce was final. It wasn't easy, but we were able to focus on the kids despite the very real conflict of the divorce. We were committed to mediating and staying out of court.

At that time, mediation was the option that kept us out of court, but it did not provide the support and tools we needed to continue to co-parent cooperatively. Mediation resolved our legal issues but did not help us set aside our own feelings for the sake of our children. We had to make that our most important intention, and it wasn't always easy.

### You Probably Agree on One Thing: You Love Your Children

I have never met parents who wanted to hurt their children. Parents may stop loving each other, but they always continue to love their children. It is that love that can build the bridge to a better divorce. A couple may not agree on much, but they always agree that they both love the children and want them to be resilient. I let my clients know that a bad divorce damages the children's resilience. For this reason, I will not go to court, nor will I work with them if they are determined to litigate. I tell them that in court the real losers are the children. I challenge the parents to restructure their families without tearing them apart. If they agree to this, I can help them to do so successfully.

## Tip 4 Imagine a Kinder Divorce

Fortunately, more and more parents are coming to me for a kinder divorce, a "conscious uncoupling," or a less adversarial process. Imagine a divorce that allows each of you to heal and move on with dignity and mutual respect. More parents now recognize the importance of continuing to maximize the children's time with each parent.

"I have never met parents who wanted to hurt their children. Parents may stop loving each other, but they always continue to love their children. It is that love that can build the bridge to a better divorce.

### Imagine Respecting Your Co-Parent (a Story)

Recently I met with a couple who had been living as "roommates" in separate bedrooms for three years because they did not want to disrupt the children's lives, and they both wanted to be full-time parents. They valued and trusted their friendship but no longer felt romantic toward each other. Their nesting arrangement had evolved organically over time, without any formal agreements, and it had worked well until the husband discovered his wife's new relationship. The surge of anger and sense of betrayal of their friendship made him question their decision to stay together as planned until their three children were out of high school.

In our meetings, they were able to process the pain of the discovery, discuss agreements regarding new relationships, and then reaffirm their friendship, mutual respect for each other as parents, and their commitment to focusing on their children's well-being. They began a thoughtful discussion of next steps, and because they still wanted to nest, they were able to make specific agreements regarding a number of issues, including communication and new relationships.

### Imagine Your Resilient Children

In my experience, parents often want to strike back or punish each other when there has been a breach of trust or a betrayal. Now it is becoming less common for parents to want to take the children away from the other spouse, even when trust has been damaged, or when they have strong feelings about their different parenting styles. This couple was able to set aside their own strong emotions and focus on protecting the vulnerable children. They reclaimed their goal to co-parent more effectively and strengthen their children's resilience. These parents imagined, and then actualized, a kinder divorce.

## Final Thoughts

Guiding your children out of the divorce minefield allows the whole family to heal and move on to a healthier next chapter. Stopping a "scorched earth" war between co-parents before it begins, and making peace as a restructured family under two roofs, will be the gift you give to your children. ■

*Dr. Ann Buscho, Ph.D. believes divorce does not have to be viewed as a failure, or a "broken home." Her mission is to help parents divorce respectfully and to stay out of court to protect their children. She works with family law professionals as a divorce coach, in a specialty called Collaborative Divorce.*
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# 15 Behaviors to Watch for in Your Children

Checking in on your children during and after divorce is vital to their ability to heal and feel supported.

By Lisa Schmidt, Post-Divorce Coach

For kids, divorce can feel like loss: the loss of a parent, the loss of the life they know, the loss of family home. You can first help your children adjust to this massive change by supporting their feelings, whatever those may be. It's almost impossible to predict a child's reaction to divorce. Sometimes, as in the case of my own son, it didn't come for months.

Children have a remarkable ability to recover when given the support they need. It is important to note that lifelong belief systems and feelings of worth are often formed in our pre-adolescent years. What you continue to reinforce or give attention to will foster beliefs and memories, good

## Create a safe environment for your child to share their feelings, then really listen to them.

or bad. Your words, actions, and reassurances to your children of your unwavering love and support are vital.

Create a safe environment for your child to share their feelings, and really listen to them. They may be feeling sadness, loss, frustration, and even anger about things you may not have expected. Help them find words for their feelings. You can help them by encouraging them to talk openly with you or your spouse. Let them be radically honest.

Acknowledge their feelings without judgment. You may not be able to take away their sadness, but it is important for you to maintain their trust. Children might be hesitant to share their true feelings for fear of hurting you, but let them know that whatever they say or are feeling is okay. If they aren't able to share their honest feelings, they will have a difficult time working through them. It might take the help of a counselor to get them to open up, so don't discount this as a method to help them heal.

If they blame themselves or their siblings, nip this in the bud as soon as possible. Many children believe that they had something to do with the divorce. Clear up any misunderstandings swiftly to help your kids let go of responsibility. Be patient, because one day they may feel that they understand and be completely confused the next. Reassure them as often as you need to that both parents will continue to love them and that they are in no way responsible for the divorce.

### 15 Worrisome Behaviors

Here is a list of behaviors to look out for in your children during and after divorce:

1. Sudden changes in physical appearance. Weight loss or gain is often a common side effect of stress.
2. Rebelling against normal routines, rules, or chores.
3. Secretive actions: closing the bedroom door when they didn't before.
4. Dramatic mood swings that are out of the norm. This could be extreme happiness or sadness.
5. Reverting to an earlier age or babyish behavior.
6. Acting out against parents and teachers. This is a cry for attention.
7. Spending excessive time around "new friends" that you've probably yet to meet.
8. Refusing to visit with their other parent.
9. Behaving one way for you and acting differently for your spouse.
10. Holding out hope that you and your spouse are getting back together.
11. Excessive crying, emotional reactions, or outbursts.
12. Suddenly "sick" frequently with headaches, bellyaches, or just trying to stay home from school.
13. Sleeping problems like insomnia, nightmares, or wanting to sleep with you.
14. Refusal to eat or inconsistent eating habits.
15. The sudden appearance of an imaginary friend.

All too often, divorcing spouses are caught up in their own hurt or feelings and forget that children have a completely different perspective. To them, you are simply Mom and Dad. You are not the unhappy wife or the workaholic husband.

Don't lie to your children or diminish the truth of the situation. Tell them that things won't always be perfect or as they were before, but that they will be okay. Showing a united front as parents can ease the distress and provide a lot of comfort to your children. Above all, reinforce that you are still a family no matter what. ■

*Lisa Schmidt is a post-divorce coach located in Detroit, MI. She helps women locally and nationally to go from surviving to thriving and get excited about their post-divorce world.* www.thelisaschmidt.com

# Do You Need a Child Custody Evaluation?

Children usually do best when parents make the decisions about their lives. However, a custody evaluation is sometimes the only option left for parents caught in a custody battle.

By Dr. Gitu Bhatia, Psychologist

Parents are generally the best people to decide what is in the best interest of their children. When parents and their lawyers are unable to agree about a custody plan for the children, there are options such as therapy and mediation that are available to parents to help put aside differences and work out plans that will help families get through the emotional journey of divorce in a mutually agreeable manner.

However, when these conflict resolution methods fail and parents continue to have strong opposition to each other, a custody evaluator can join the divorce team. The custody evaluation process typically happens after one or more court appearances where there is no progress on deciding a custody plan for the children. In most cases, it is preferable for the parents to decide where their children should spend time, but a professional evaluator is there when that cannot happen.

## What Is a Custody Evaluator?

A child custody evaluator is typically a psychologist, although other mental health professionals also serve as evaluators. They generally take special training every year in best practices in conducting evaluations and they are often appointed by the court to serve in this role.

## How Long Does a Custody Evaluation Take?

Depending on the situation and urgency, child custody evaluations can be expeditious or protracted. For example, some fast-track evaluations happen at the courthouse, while others may take months to be completed.

Each parent and the children meet with the evaluator. In the case of a brief evaluation, the evaluator gives verbal findings to the judge to assist them in making a custody ruling. This can happen in one day.

In other cases, an evaluation may happen outside of the court, but with the evaluator meeting with the family in an office. In a full-blown evaluation, the custody evaluator will typically conduct psychological assessments of both parents, meet with each member of the family individually, and meet with the parent and children in each home. The evaluator may also consult with teachers, therapists, tutors, friends, or other people who have knowledge of the dynamics of the family and each parent's capacity to be an effective parent in a post-divorce, contentious situation.

The evaluator will issue a written report, typically within a few weeks. A full child custody evaluation, however, can take months and may cost upwards of $25,000. The focus of any child custody evaluation is to find what is best for the *children* – which may not be what the parents want.

## How to Deal with Your Children During the Evaluation Process?

It is important to note that it is typical for everybody to have some degree of unhappiness when a child custody evaluation is ordered. Nobody will get exactly what they desire, because sharing custody of children necessarily means that there will be compromise by everyone.

If you are going through a child custody evaluation, it is important to be truthful with your children and to encourage them to be truthful. For example, you may say, "Mom and Dad can't figure out how to share you because we both love you so much. Someone is going to come and talk with our family and help us make those decisions. When you speak with them, please be honest and say what you want."

It is also important to let them know that the evaluator will listen to everyone and then they will write a report to help the judge make the final decision. A child should never feel the burden of any custody decision on their shoulders.

Children often do best when parents make the decisions about their lives. The parents are often more committed to making things work out if they feel they have some level of autonomy in the lives of their children. Unfortunately, there can be many emotional costs to a child custody evaluation along with the financial consequences of divorce.

An unsatisfactory judgement based on the evaluation can set up a lifetime of non-compliance and a sense of injustice, which is unfair to the children. Ultimately, the ongoing conflict, hurt, and anger between parents is more detrimental to children than the actual time-sharing arrangement. Children do best when they know that their parents can help solve problems together and communicate as co-parents. ■

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# 10 Ways to Connect with Your Stepchild

If you focus more on understanding your stepchildren rather than seeking to be understood, you'll create positive memories that will stand the test of time.

By Terry Gaspard, Licensed Therapist and Author

Most of the stepparents who contact me for support tell me they had no idea what they were getting into. One stepmom, Dana, put it this way, "I was never a mom before, and when I married Tim, I was blindsided by his daughter's jealousy and anger toward me. I was getting by trying to be nice to my new stepdaughter, but comments like 'You're not my mom!' made me feel disrespected."

Different from a biological parent, a major thrust of being a stepparent is to be an adult friend to your stepchildren on some level. Not like a school friend, but an adult friend who is more akin to being a mentor, who is also a parental figure.

It's important not to rush the process of disciplining your new stepchildren, especially if they're teenagers or have a biological parent in their life. Focusing on giving your stepchildren time to adjust to their new living situation and being a good role model will set the stage for a solid relationship with him or her over time.

One stepdad put it this way: "At times I felt like a stranger around Tommy, my stepson, when I first married my wife. I didn't know exactly how to relate to him. But after a while, by showing interest and attending his football games, things got better, and I no longer feel like an outsider."

There are many ways you can develop a positive relationship with your stepchildren. You can invite them to participate in activities that interest them and expose them to some of your hobbies – such as bike riding, playing tennis, boating, or reading. For instance, inviting your stepchildren to share your love of visiting a new place while on a summer vacation can help you form a friendship as you explore a new area.

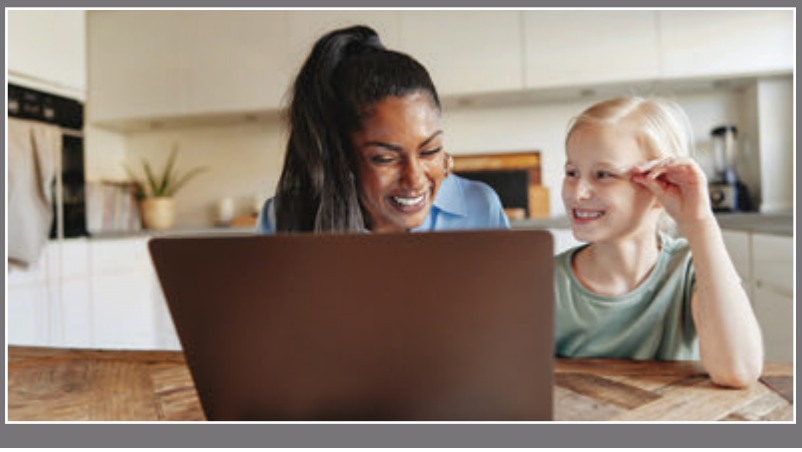
Further, attending some of your stepchildren's school events, showing interest in their hobbies, and supporting their need for one-on-one time with your spouse can promote a caring relationship. This takes time, years really.

Stephen, a seasoned stepdad, put it like this, "I started going to Alicia's basketball games and showed enthusiasm. At first, she was a bit distant but after inviting her friends to have pizza afterward and talking about the game, she warmed up."

## 10 Ways to Connect with Your Stepchild

1. **Stepparents need to proceed slowly.** Take your time in getting to know your stepchild. Rushing it may satisfy your own unmet needs to be liked, but it could backfire. After all, you will most likely be seen as an outsider since your stepkids spent some time alone with their other biological parent before you came on the scene.
2. **Be supportive of your partner and their need to spend time alone with their biological child.** Having good boundaries and giving your partner space will pay off in the long run. Try not to feel neglected by him or her. Make plans with your friends and graciously step out of their way.
3. **Have realistic expectations**. Just because things went well when you were dating your new partner doesn't ensure things will go smoothly once you're a committed couple. A marriage effectively ends any hope of his or her mother and father reunifying and can reignite those feelings of loss for your stepchildren.
4. **Be a positive role model**. Remember that your stepkids will be there for the duration, whether or not a positive relationship unfolds with you. Step to the higher ground and set the good example they deserve by being kind and showing compassion toward him or her.
5. **Develop a relationship with your stepchildren through hobbies and interests**. Sharing interests from sports to the arts can only help you develop a bond. Be persistent if he or she fails to invite you to an event or activity. Keep in mind, you're the adult and need to be the mature one. Say something like: "I'd love to go to your basketball game. How do I get tickets?"
6. **Understand your stepchild's view**. First, it's a given that your stepchildren had a relationship with your spouse that existed before you came on the scene. Stepfamilies are complicated and even if your stepchildren seem to like you well enough,

**Take your time when getting to know your stepchild. Rushing it may satisfy your own unmet needs to be liked, but it could backfire.**



they'll sometimes want time alone with their parent and prefer you weren't in the picture.

7. **Be supportive of your spouse and their ex working out holiday or vacation schedules**. Try to be courteous and respectful of the "other parent," keeping in mind that it's likely that neither parent would have chosen having their children live with them part-time.
8. **Realize that there's no such thing as instant love**. Even if you do not hit it off with your stepchild, you can still develop a working relationship built on respect. If your stepchild doesn't warm up to you right away that does not mean you have failed. Adopting realistic expectations can help you get through some rough spots.
9. **Cooperate with your spouse and have regular conversations about stepfamily life.** Most of the talking should take place away from your stepkids, but be sure to have cordial conversations and informal discussions about family rules, roles, chores, and routines with the kids.
10. **Present a united front with your spouse**. This is crucial to the formation of a healthy stepfamily. This action requires respect, caring, and lots of love because it may not be easy to do if you do not agree with your spouse. Caring and respect are especially important, cannot be rushed, and are "earned" or granted over time among all family members.

Be sure to encourage and listen to your stepchildren's input so they feel validated. Ultimately, you and your spouse are the adults who have the last say on household decisions, but showing your stepchildren you respect their input will help cement a good relationship in the years to come. One way you can do this is to hold regular family meetings. Below are some helpful guidelines to assist you in getting started.

## Stepfamily Meetings

While not an original concept, a family meeting can take on new meaning in the remarried, step, and blended family. The immense effort it can take to get all family members together in one space is worthwhile in most cases. But by no stretch of the imagination are these meetings easy or without conflict. The most important aspects of the family meeting are structure, flexibility, active listening, and having someone in the meeting record all the findings.

Family meetings are useful to plan events and to hash out new roles, rules, and problems that exist between family members. For the most part, a family meeting is a good place to be vulnerable with each other and to let your feelings, thoughts, and needs be heard by other members in a safe atmosphere. As long as feelings are stated in a non-blameful way, solutions can be reached through compromise and good listening skills. The parent's and stepparent's goal should be to understand their children/stepchildren and build a family culture of appreciation, respect, and tolerance.

## 4 Tips for Setting Up Family Meetings:

1. All members need to have choices regarding the day and time of the meeting. It's important to try not to leave anyone out, meet on a regular basis, and set a time limit.
2. Family members are advised to write down complaints, suggestions, or grievances on a slip and put them in a box. A meeting can be held when there are several slips in the box or about once a week.
3. It is a good idea to request a different volunteer at each meeting to be a scribe and to keep these notes in an agreed upon location in your home.
4. Any family member can request a family meeting with at least one day's notice given to other members.

Most of all, have fun and enjoy your time together as a stepfamily! Remember that you're creating positive memories that will endure the test of time if you focus more on understanding your stepchildren rather than seeking to be understood. ■

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*Terry Gaspard (LICSW, MSW) is a licensed therapist, college instructor, and nonfiction author specializing in divorce, women's issues, children, and relationships. Her new book,* The Remarriage Manual: How to Make Everything Work Better the Second Time Around *(Sounds True, 2020) offers 10 essential keys to a successful remarriage.*
www.movingpastdivorce.com

# 5 Steps for Dating After Divorce with Children

Dating after divorce can be challenging; when children are involved, you must take your time and consider their feelings and needs. Following these steps will help keep the focus on your kids.

By J. Hope Suis, Relationship Expert

There will come a moment after the dust settles and your heart begins to heal that your thoughts will turn again towards love. You will want companionship and maybe even wish to consider trying marriage again. Before you travel too far down that road, there are a few things you need to keep in mind if you are considering dating after divorce with children. Even though your ex is now in your rear-view mirror, your children still love – and, hopefully, still have an ongoing relationship with – their other parent. It is important to never put them in a position where they feel like they must take sides or divide their allegiance.

# Steps for Parents Considering Dating After Divorce

These steps will help you keep the focus on your children – and set the stage for creating a successful blended family some day, if that's your goal.

## 1 Be Sure You Are Ready to Date

The loneliness may set in before you are truly ready to date again. Do not rush into another relationship just to fill a void. Examine your motives and make sure the decision is not made from fear or even revenge. Take the necessary time to heal, and remember your children, regardless of their ages, need time to process and heal as well. Introducing a new partner too soon can bring on confusion in younger children and resentment in the older ones.

## 2 Lay the Groundwork for Dating

Before you actively begin looking for someone to date, introduce the idea to your children. Pick a casual, non-stressful time and start the dialogue. Obviously, if the children are very young, this might not be appropriate, but if they are a little older, and especially teenagers, tell them that you believe it is time for you to start dating again. Ask their opinions and gauge their reactions. You do not have to halt your decision if they resist, but you must be prepared for the journey to be a little rocky. When you do find someone, keep the lines of communication open. If the goal is to blend families, it is extremely important to consider their feelings and needs.

## 3 Include the Children in Your Activities

Obviously, you will not want them along on every date, but you should make times and schedule events where they are welcomed and invited. If they are older, do not force them to participate, but make sure they believe the invitation is genuine. One word of caution, do not take this step until you feel comfortable with your dating choice. The first date jitters should be gone and some relationship groundwork started before including the children. They should see you happy and comfortable with this person, but be mindful of displaying too much open affection in front of them at this stage.

## 4 Pace Yourself

After going through the sadness and pain of a divorce, it will be exhilarating and exciting to meet someone who is really interested in you. Be careful not to rush the relationship. Do not spend all your free time with them and put your children and their needs on the back burner. This opens your children to resentment and confirms their fears that their life may once again be turned upside down. The family unit must remain your priority, and the children should never be viewed as an obstacle to your new romance or feel like an outsider in their presence.

## 5 Expect Some Ups and Downs

Remember that you were not the only one affected by the divorce. The children not only lost one parent in the home, but also their feeling of stability in the world. Even adult children will suffer grief at the loss of their parent's marriage. One moment they will want you to be happy and move on, and the next they will be sad, or even angry, at the changes forced upon them.

Also keep in mind their loyalty to the other parent. They will often become confused and conflicted if they truly like your new partner, but see pain if their other parent is upset about your decision. Do not expect too much from them and allow them time and space to sort out their feelings. Be sure to also objectively measure your new partner's attitude and connection with your children. There may be some adjustment time involved with them as well; just make sure your children are always treated with respect.

Moving forward with your life and dating after divorce can be very challenging. Desiring a new companion is natural and will eventually happen. This time around, there is more to consider; when there are children involved, you simply must put more time and thought into the dating process. If your goal is to remarry, then the stepfamily dynamic will be a reality and it starts way before a new marriage. It begins in the dating process. The steps you take, along with the patience and time invested at the beginning, will go a long way towards a peaceful and successful blended family. ■

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*J. Hope Suis is an inspirational writer and relationship expert with over 30 years of experience in single-parenting, dating, and relationships. Her passion in life is Hope Boulevard, which is a blog and website focused on uplifting and challenging readers to live their best life now.*

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