

Putting the Children First

A Parental Guide for Separation and Divorce

Divorce is an unhappy time for parents and children alike. Parents, however, can minimize the hurt and trauma children experience by the way in which they relate to each other. There is a large body of evidence that indicates that children prosper when their parents resolve conflict calmly as they go through separation and divorce. Children need to see their parents resolve their differences appropriately through negotiation and compromise. When parents argue frequently and intensely or do not find resolutions to problems their children are more vulnerable to emotional and behavioral difficulties.

Important Points for Parents to Consider During Separation or Divorce

1. It is in the best interests of the children if parents can get beyond their anger and develop a relationship that is businesslike and based on mutual respect. While this may take some time to develop the only relationship divorcing spouses have over the long run is co-parenting. Adopting a business-like attitude means sticking with the parenting issue in your conversations with your ex-spouse even when you have the impulse to say other things. Arguments hurt children. Always walk away from a fight!
2. Children often think in magical ways and assume responsibility for the important events around them. It is important to tell your children that they are not responsible or at fault for the divorce. They also need to know that there is nothing they can do to bring mom and dad back together again.
3. Never place the children in the position of choosing loyalty between parents. This means not bad mouthing, calling names or ridiculing the other parent. It is best to reassure your child that he/she can have a loving relationship with both parents.
4. Do not use the children to make telephone calls, convey messages or be a spy on the other parent. This puts a child in an awkward position of responsibility and demands loyalty for one parent over the other. Children are often left feeling guilty.
5. Parents can often feel guilty for the adjustments their children have to make with a separation or divorce. Develop an authoritative style in parenting your children. This means being firm about rules and limits as well as demonstrating warmth and affection. This style of parenting has been identified as a buffer against the negative effects of divorce.
6. Guard against your child becoming super mature and eager to be a confidant or manage the household. It is important that you not seek out your child for emotional support or allow your child to take too much responsibility for the house. Kids who assume high levels of responsibility are more vulnerable to problems later on.
7. To whatever extent possible, try to develop as much consistency in the child's environment. This means having familiar toys, objects, pictures, etc., in both homes as

much as possible. Children get a sense of comfort from what is familiar.

8. Be attuned to a change in your child's behavior. Children react differently to divorce. Some kids become aggressive and act out while others withdraw and are hardly noticed. A change in behavior may indicate feelings that your child needs to express. Encourage your child to talk even if they have negative feelings for you. And then listen. Getting defensive when your child reluctantly expresses him/herself is a sure way to promote silence.

9. Keep the children away from parental disputes regarding money, custody and other settlement issues. Children have no input on these adult decisions and should be protected from them.

10. Lastly, always reassure your child that they are loved. Children can easily feel unloved as they observe the process of their parents going through conflict, separation and divorce.

Patti Borko of Southern Illinois University identified five factors of resiliency in children facing stress:

1. The presence of a safe, strong, respectful adult who cares
2. The availability of safe havens---home, church, community center
3. The ability to use play and work to work out feelings
4. Ability to escape into healthy interests and projects
5. The ability to learn effective coping skills.

Being a Good Co-Parent Means

- Achieving a civil working relationship with your ex-spouse
- Agreeing to rules that minimizes the stress on the children
- Never making disparaging remarks about you ex-spouse
- Never using your child to carry messages or spy
- Recognizing that you'll never always get your way with your ex-spouse
- Learning to state problems clearly without negative comments
- Take turns speaking and listening
- Move from blaming to resolving
- Focus on solutions not winning