CHILDREN AND DIVORCE GUIDE

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

These are just some of the many far-reaching questions that parents struggle with during and after divorce. This special **Children and Divorce Guide** provides you with 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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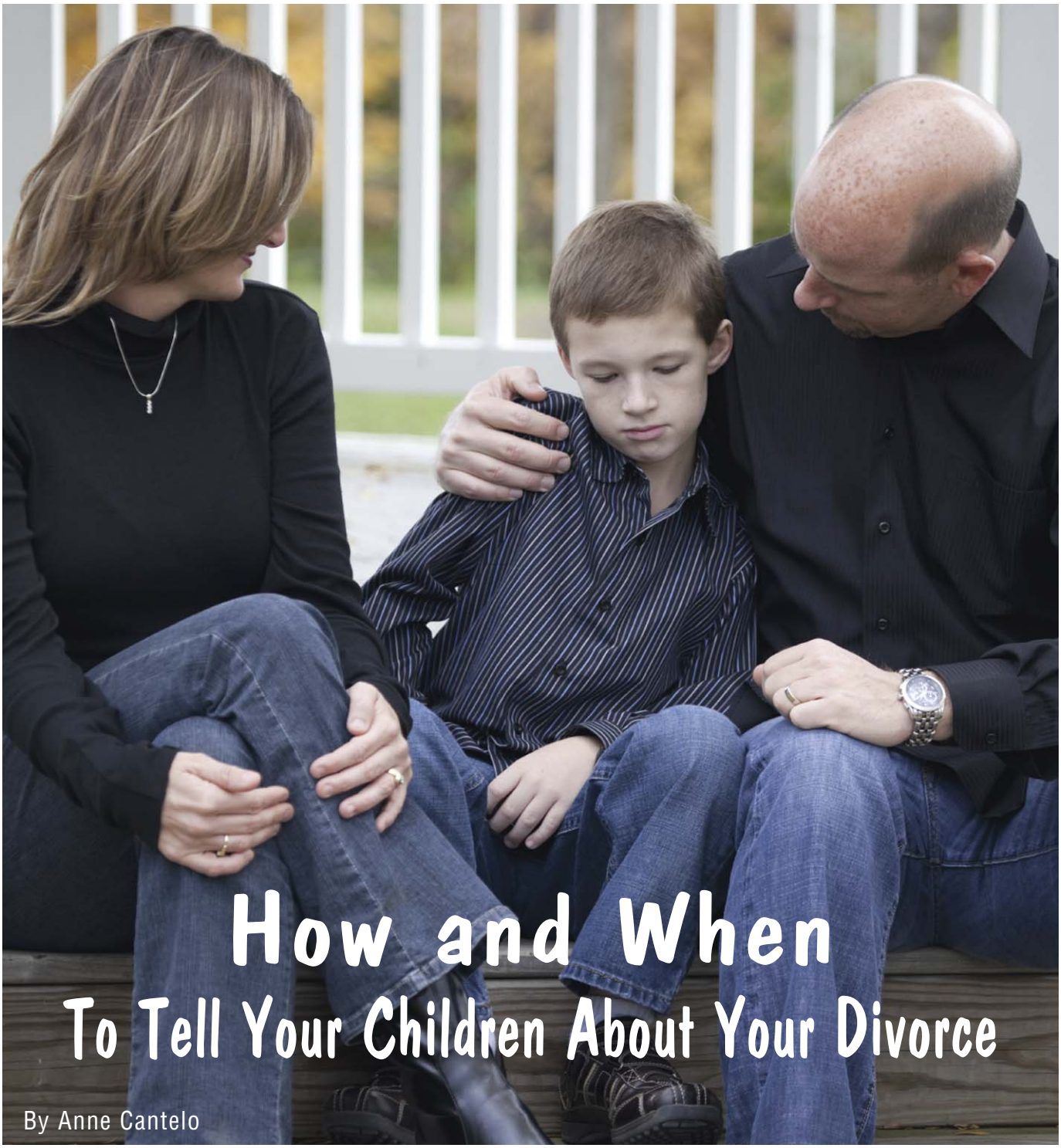

How and When To Tell Your Children About Your Divorce

By Anne Cantelo

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

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

The don'ts:

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

Some of these may sound obvious but they're all based on real-life accounts. If you have more than one child make sure they all find out from you and not from each other or from listening at doors. This will give them a distorted idea of what's going to happen, and because you've not discussed it openly they're likely to feel less able to tell you their worries and concerns.

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

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

The dos:

- Try to speak to each child on his or her own and get out of earshot of the others. This should be one-to-one or two-to-one (with both parents there) if possible so that they feel free to ask questions and have your complete attention
- Be loving and affectionate; recognize and accept their pain (but don't anticipate or encourage it if it's not there)
- Reassure them of your love and of the love of your spouse for them (if he or she isn't with you)
- Reassure them that you'll both be in their lives
- Promise them that you will be friendly with your spouse
- Be prepared to answer their questions, and also for their refusal to talk about the divorce
- Be ready to come back to the subject when they're ready
- Make what you say age appropriate Be there for them: choose a time when you don't have to rush off to do something else
- Let them be by themselves if they want: some children will want to grieve in private before they're ready to talk to you
- Be as honest as you can be with them. It's good to let them know you're upset but try to cut out the bitterness you feel ■

This article has been edited and excerpted from the book It's No Big Deal Really*, with permission by Anne Cantelo, copyright © 2007.* It's No Big Deal Really *is a parent's guide to making divorce easy for children, and is recommended by the NSPCC. Her book can be purchased on* amazon.com.

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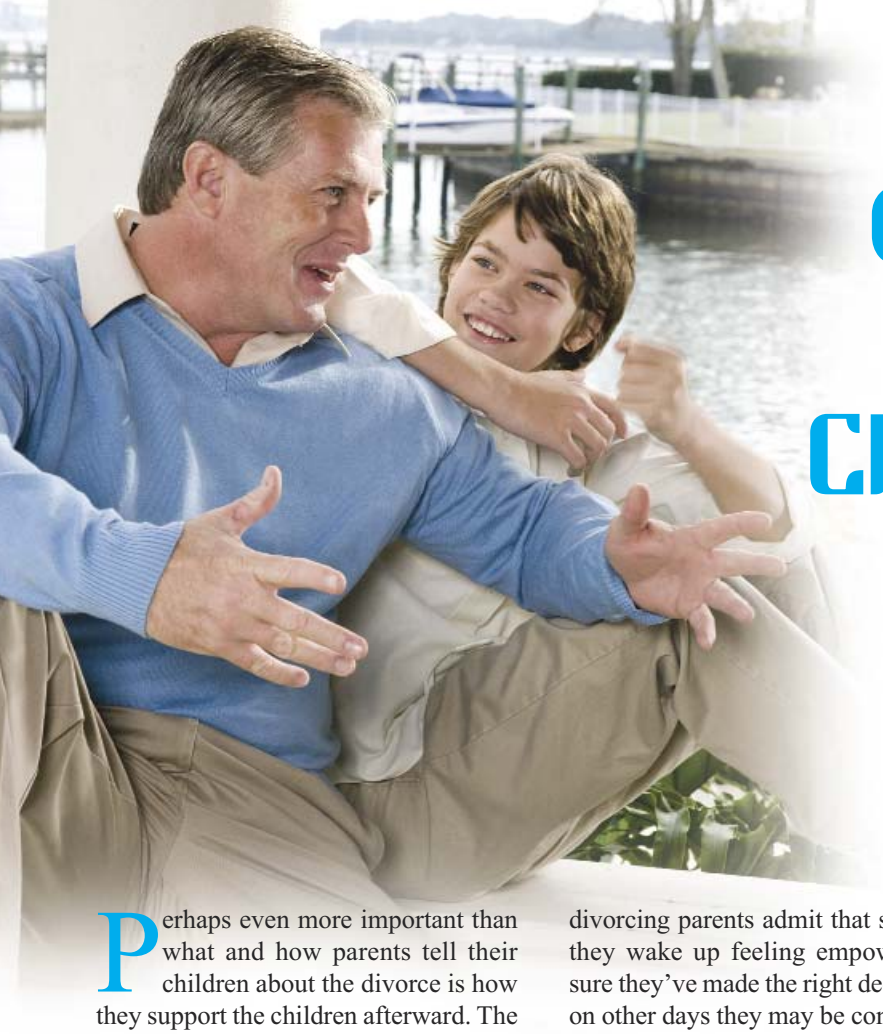

Once You've Told Your Children about the Divorce

By Dr. Lisa Rene Reynolds

Perhaps even more important than what and how parents tell their children about the divorce is how they support the children afterward. The following are some guidelines for helping children best adjust to the changes a divorce will bring in the early days.

Accept Initial Reactions

There are many normal ways a child may react to the news of a divorce in his or her family. Some children may appear shocked and others may report they weren't at all surprised. Some children will be outwardly emotional (yelling or crying) but others may hold it in, becoming distant or quiet. A few children may even remain in denial about what they were told and may not seem to have any initial response at all.

Accept all reactions. There is no right or wrong way for a child to respond to such serious news. Furthermore, there are no right or wrong feelings to have when a child hears of the divorce. Common feelings include anger, sadness, confusion, hurt, loneliness, self-blame, worry, powerlessness, rejection, and in very few cases — relief. It may help to think for a moment about your own range of feelings about the divorce. Most divorcing parents admit that some days they wake up feeling empowered and sure they've made the right decision, but on other days they may be consumed by sadness and doubt about whether they are doing the right thing.

In short, there is a wide range of common emotions and reactions that children may experience when parents initially tell them about the divorce; all of them are normal and okay.

Help Your Kids Deal with Their Feelings

There are many ways that people in general express and deal with negative emotion. Children are no different. However, with such limited life experience, many children will require help in learning what to do with such feelings.

First, it's important to be direct in saying that whatever your child is feeling is acceptable. "It's okay to feel angry," sends an important message to children that it's valid to feel a certain way.

Also, never criticize your child for experiencing any emotion. If your child cries and expresses hatred toward you or your spouse for "ruining my life", you need to be sensitive to the child's experience. In this scenario, a non-supportive response would be, "Oh, c'mon now, you don't really hate us. No more tears now. It's not so bad. There are many worse parents you could have." A better reply might be, "Wow — that's a really strong feeling to have. But its okay — believe it or not, we understand and know you need time to understand this. We're sorry you have to go through this and wish there was something we could do to change how you feel about it."

During the process of divorce, expressing negative emotion is an integral part of the healing process. And although all feelings are valid, not all ways of expressing these feelings are acceptable or desirable. You can play a key part in helping your children to learn healthy ways to vent emotions such as anger and frustration.

There are ways that assist both "stuffers" (children who hold all their emotions inside) and "exploders" (children who act out their emotions in undesirable ways, such as hitting or breaking things) with expressing feelings. The rule of thumb should be not to change the feeling your child is having, but rather to find an appropriate outlet for the

emotion in order to help the child better cope with it.

Talking is not always the preferable mode of dealing with emotion for children (especially very young ones). Help your children channel the emotional energy into something; doing and playing can often yield much better results. The following is an example of how play elicited far more information than talking could have with a very young child I saw for therapy.

"James" was a two-year-old boy whom the court mandated to attend a few therapy sessions with me after he exhibited a great deal of anger; namely, hitting and biting his parents and other children at his day care. His parents said the behaviour started when they began their (very nasty) divorce proceedings*. Each parent blamed the other for James's escalating behaviour.*

I questioned how effective a few sessions with James would be given that his verbal abilities were extremely limited. Nevertheless, I jumped into some traditional play therapy with him, hoping to get some understanding of what he was thinking or feeling.

Together, we tackled a huge mound of wooden blocks. We built for a few minutes in silence and then decided our creation looked like a castle. I put a moat around the castle and explained its purpose to James. Then I let him choose whether the moat should be filled with alligators or sharks. He chose sharks.

I used some items from around the room to represent James's family members. James chose a black marker for his dad, a silver car key for his mom, a tiny plastic duck for himself, and various other objects for his stepbrother, grandparents, and Aunt Judy. I placed "dad" (the black marker) on top of the castle. Then I put "mom" (the car key) on the wall of the moat. I asked James if that looked right to him. He grabbed a spare block and hit "dad" off of the castle. Then he went over to retrieve "dad" and used him to knock "mom" into the "waters" of the moat.

I was getting a great deal of information from James, so I decided to continue on with our castle play. By the end of my 35 minutes with him, I had a pretty good understanding of the family dynamics as James saw them. I learned that dad was not the desirable leader of the family, that dad did not allow mom anywhere inside the walls surrounding the castle, that James hid himself beneath blocks whenever possible, and that mom never came over to uncover James. I received far more knowledge on where James's anger stemmed from than I ever could have extracted with words or questions alone.

Remember that parents are one of the primary role models their children have for how to express negative emotions in meaningful ways.

Outdoor physical play, shooting hoops, digging, and dancing are great outlets for children (and many adults as well). Less physically active play and creative activities can be helpful coping mechanisms for children as well. You can encourage your children to transfer their feelings into artwork ("Can you draw me a picture of how you feel?" or "What colors do you think you'd use to color in this picture of our house today?"). The simple use of finger paint or Play-Doh can be therapeutic (if you haven't ever done it as an adult, you should give it a try). You can also encourage your children to keep a diary. This is an especially effective tool for dealing with emotions. Another benefit of the journaling is that as time goes by, your children can look back over past entries and see the changes they have made in their thoughts and feelings.

As the old adage goes, "Children learn as they live." Perhaps the most powerful tool that you as divorcing parents have in helping your children is to offer tangible examples of how to vent emotions appropriately. If you use such coping skills as talking to a friend, praying, seeing a therapist, screaming into a pillow, writing in a journal, or going for a run, you should share these things with your children.

Don't Be a Cheerleader

One mistake divorcing parents frequently make is in trying too hard to be cheerleaders about the eventual benefits of the divorce. Helping your child hear and digest the news of a divorce includes understanding that he or she may not agree that a divorce is desirable. In fact, *the vast majority of all children whose parents divorce wish their parents would stay together*. You need to acknowledge that even if you think your divorce is for the best, your children will most likely not agree. Reflect this acknowledgment in the way you respond to your children. For instance, if your child declares his or her unhappiness about your divorce, you should never try to convince that child that happiness is required.

The best (and only) way to convince a child that the divorce is for the best is to give it some time and show the child a healthier and happier family system post-divorce. Think about it: If you tell your children that the forkful of a new slimy green vegetable tastes really, really good, they probably won't believe you just because you said so. But if your child is brave enough to take a bite and discovers the veggie tastes just like cotton candy, he or she will be a believer!

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

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The Best Interest of the Child

By Mike Mastracci

It has been said that the best interest standard really comes down to a judge's "best guess" as to what is optimal for a child in any particular case. And who is the judge and why is he or she the best person to make this decision for you and your children, well that's what this article is all about.

Parents in conflict will quickly learn the court lingo when it comes to child custody disputes. Everything that either party does is somehow, someway, supposedly linked to, and directly in pursuit of, what is in the "best interest" of the child or children at issue. The "ends justify the means" becomes the rationale for the parents in moderate- to high-conflict cases. High-conflict cases often result in false allegations and accusations. If the overall goal is to "win" custody, then does it matter if dad, for example, is falsely accused of inappropriate conduct with his child?

If mom is recklessly exaggerating or outright fabricating, as long as it is only in an effort to make dad "look bad" so that he will not likely get custody, is there any real harm done if that accomplishes what mom knows is really in her child's best interest? Probably not — at least not in the eyes of a selfishly blinded parent caught in a war of attrition. The sad reality is that in the majority of cases each parent tries to look his or her best by making the other parent look inept.

The run of the mill "we produced a child and now we hate each other" type of case is a mud-slinging contest with the echoing of the words, "in the best interest of the child." In the classic script of course, the man is always abusive, threatening, and intimidating and should only have supervised visitation to protect the safety of the child

and the child's "best interests." The mother is referred to as slut and is accused of being inattentive to the physical or emotional needs of the child while also allegedly engaging in a scheme to alienate the child from the father and his whole side of the family. Furthermore, she is a liar, just ask anyone who knows her! Call your next witness.

The best interest of the child standard is not supposed to be a test on "good parent" vs. "bad parent" decision-making. However, although some state courts may characterize the criteria and terminology differently, the gist of the court's reasoning in deciding who gets the prize is to evaluate certain "factors." The court examines these factors and weighs the advantages and disadvantages of the alternative environments — who the children get to live with. The criteria for judicial determination include:

1. Fitness of the parents
2. Character and reputation of the parties
3. Desire of the natural parents and agreements between the parties
4. Potentiality of maintaining natural family relations
5. Preference of the children
6. Material opportunities affecting the future of the children
7. Age, health, and sex of the children
8. Residences of parents and opportunity for visitation
9. Length of separation from the natural parents
10. Prior voluntary abandonment or surrender of the child or children

At the conclusion of all the trial testimony, a judge, a complete stranger to you and your children, will say that he or she has examined the totality of the situation in light of these factors. He or she will say that the court has considered all the factors and that the decision was reached without specifically focusing on any one factor in and of itself. As far as all the lies that the court will have heard, expect that from the bench you will hear something like, "I have had an opportunity to observe the witnesses and assess their credibility and demeanor throughout these proceedings. And while I do have some credibility concerns, I believe that it is in little Johnny's best interest to remain in the care and custody of his mother."

When the best interest standard jargon is broken down, there are far more questions and concerns than there are answers and solutions. To illustrate, follow my logic as we examine just a couple of the ten aforementioned factors and weigh the advantages and disadvantages of each area of focus in relation to the other "facts" and factors.

The court should consider the fitness of the parties. What in the hell does that mean? Let us say mom is physically fit and trim and dad is three hundred and fifty pounds and moves at a snail's pace, does that matter? What if mom is on antidepressant medication or in therapy? Who isn't in therapy of some sort these days? Many judges are not strangers to shrinks and such. But dad used to smoke pot and snort cocaine, how about that? Mom got a DUI charge last year on her birthday and the court made her go to a twenty-six-week alcohol program. Is she fit to have custody? Dad recently had a heart attack and mom has breast cancer, now what? Suppose that both have no such issues? Suppose they are equally fit or unfit?

While the financial fitness of the parties will likely be addressed too, in terms of material opportunities affecting the future of the children, where does it begin to significantly matter? The court will consider the character and reputation of the parties. Well, let's open the closet doors and let all the skeletons out! Ten years ago he hit his former girlfriend. She used to be a prostitute before going to college and earning her master's degree in early childhood development, now what? Dad had five witnesses say what a good person he is and one witness was a priest. Mom had six witnesses saying what a scoundrel dad has always been; and as for his priest witness, well eighteen years ago he allegedly molested mom's cousin. Dad once was convicted of petty theft, even though he contended that pulling out of the gas station without paying was an accident. It probably was, but nonetheless it is on his record. Oh, and let's not forget the smut sites he visits on the Internet and those chat rooms. He is such a womanizer! But what about those dirty pictures of her and his two best friends playing naked twister in a sleazy looking hotel room? What about the fact that he lied on his tax returns and makes twenty thousand dollars a year "under the table," does that matter? But she used the money for her and the kids and she signed the joint tax return too. Yes, but only because he forced her to do it and she had no choice; remember, he is abusive. All his ex-girlfriends hate him and all his family will lie for him. It goes on and on — all under oath to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. The truth is that most parents will find little trouble telling a few lies if it will help them obtain custody of their children. How far would you go? How far would your ex go?

What is also interesting is that most of the terrible things the litigants say about each other were known before they ever had children together. When blinded by lust and maybe even love, these "minor" issues were overlooked. After all, no one is perfect and we have all done things that we are not proud of in life. During courtship, the same people may have said, "She's changed" or "You just have to really know him to understand."

Now, in litigation, the court is called upon to consider the desire of the natural parents and agreements between the parties. Well, let's see. They are both fighting for custody of their child. They are willing to spend the equivalent of their child's college education on attorney's fees and litigation expenses. They will air out all their dirty laundry in public. Does the one who will stop at nothing to win have the most desire? Does he really want the children to live with him or is he is just trying to punish her for ending the relationship? Is it a little of both? Does it really matter what the motive is as long as the "best interests" of the children are served?

As far as the court considering past agreements between the parties, more "he said — she said." He claims he was promised 50- 50 with the children until she found out that such an arrangement would significantly cut down on her monthly child support check. She claims that he only wanted to have them every other weekend at the most and he has never even changed a diaper.

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

The court should also consider the potentiality of maintaining natural family relations. I firmly believe that this really should be a central focus of what it is all about, especially in high-conflict cases. Even if one parent seems significantly superior in general parenting skills yet constantly does all that is possible to restrict the children's access to the other parent, the resulting constant conflict and power struggle will never be in the children's best interests. One of the difficulties lies in proving the evil intent of the self-proclaimed "superior parent" to undermine the importance of the adverse or at-risk parent-child relationship.

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

Again, litigants come to court armed with all the right things to say. "He can see the children whenever he wants. I don't have a problem with that. I want the children to have a great relationship with their dad." Even if the trial judge is presented with examples of mom restricting access or undermining the father's role, he or she may simply attribute it to the temporary hostility of the court proceedings and not recognize the deep-seated mindset that will last throughout the child's minority years. The court is not going to want to listen to all of the minor complaints of the parties and usually only a small percentage of what each parent wants the court to realize about his or her case is ever properly presented, if at all. Furthermore, what may be of great importance to one or both of the parties or to the lawyers may be of little, if any, significance to the fact finder.

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

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

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

"Make no mistake about it," the judge can rightly say, "I do have the complete and sole authority to order when each of you will see your child and when you will not. I can make the schedule for you. I can decide who makes all the decisions, some of the decisions, or none of the decisions. I can order you to all kinds of classes, treatment, and counselling if I find that there is a need and that it would be in your children's best interest. I will tell you when your vacation is and who will wake up with the children on

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What Your Child Wants Most Is To Freely Love Both Parents

By Shannon R. Rios, MS LMFT

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

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

"Resentment is like taking your own poison and expecting the other person to die."- Author Unknown

Taking your own poison or giving this poison to your child is not healthy. We know from numerous studies that a great percentage of diseases are stress-related. Looking at the word disease, we can see dis-ease. When we are not at ease we are in stress, which impacts our health and the health of our child. It is your responsibility as a parent to be healthy for your child. Your child needs you — so let go of the bottle of poison and be healthy so you can attend to your child's needs. Especially the need of being able to love both parents. An angry parent does not equal a good parent. I ask you to be healthy for your children. You won't regret it, I promise.

This article has been edited and excerpted from the book The 7 Fatal Mistakes Divorced & Separated Parents Make: Strategies for Raising Healthy Children of Divorce**,** *permission by Shannon R. Rios, copyright © 2009. Shannon Rios, MS LMFT is a marriage and family therapist. She can be reached at www.healthychildrenofdivorce.com; and her book can be purchased on her website or amazon.com.*

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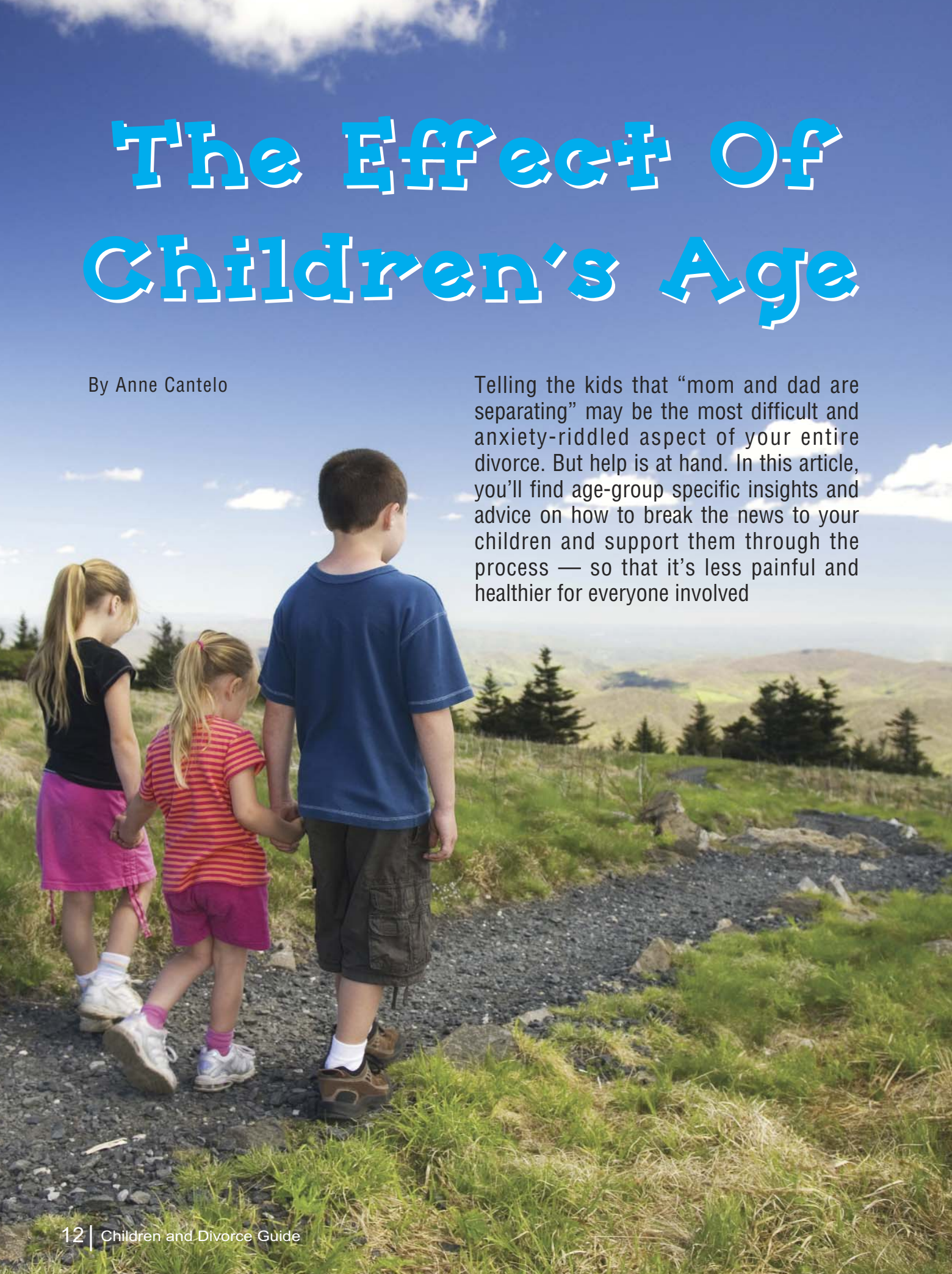
The Effect Of Children's Age

By Anne Cantelo

Telling the kids that "mom and dad are separating" may be the most difficult and anxiety-riddled aspect of your entire divorce. But help is at hand. In this article, you'll find age-group specific insights and advice on how to break the news to your children and support them through the process — so that it's less painful and healthier for everyone involved



You think you can, like many do, live in marriage that bores you without showing any symptoms to your children. You can continue to be good, supportive parents together while no longer having interest in each other. If that's you then you need to think seriously about whether you're really prepared to make that sacrifice and how long for: forever or until they reach a certain age? What age will it affect them least?

The most surprising thing I learned in researching this book "It's No Big Deal Really" is that it's better not to make the sacrifice at all unless you can make it forever. The older the 'children' are, the worse it seems to affect them and when saying that I'm including adults in their 20's and 30's.

Babies

If your children are under two years old then you can assume that they'll not remember this time in their lives and they're likely to quickly settle into new routines. On the downside it means that they will never experience having both their parents together and will grow up with the uncertainty of how they fit into whatever new family is created. These children also suffer most from never growing up in an intact household.

Even if they're unaware of what's happening babies will pick up on tension in the house so may be much more restless than normal. Their progression may seem to halt a little; e.g., refusing solid food after they're weaned. They'll therefore need lots of cuddles and reassurance and, like you would with older children, try not to let them hear you fight.

Toddlers

As a toddler's vocabulary develops they will understand the fights between you. They will also have some concept what a fight is and what anger is. They will be very familiar with how angry they are during a tantrum and the fact it passes. Speak to them and reassure them in a language they understand. 'You get really mad with Mummy sometimes but you don't always feel like that, do you? Mummy and daddy feel like that sometimes with each other; but that doesn't make it something that you need to be scared of, does it?' Like babies, they will probably show that they're unsettled by becoming more irritable, tantrums may increase and they could revert to more baby-like behavior.

The separation will affect them more than the divorce, as they won't understand the finality of divorce; what will matter to them is if one of their beloved parents is not at home any more. However, like babies, they will soon settle into new routine.

Young schoolchildren

At this age they will need reassurance that they will have the love and protection they need whatever happens, and that they're not going to lose one of you. A few days in a very young child's life is a long time so unless there is a danger that they will hear something try to delay telling them about the separation until the practical arrangements are being made. However if one child is older it would be unfair to expect him or her to keep the secret from younger siblings.

It's worth letting your children's teacher know about the problems at home. It's not uncommon for children to restrain themselves at home (for fear of redirecting the anger they sense to them) and to release that emotion at school in behavior such as bullying. If the teachers are aware they can ensure that they keep alert to possible problems and deal particularly sensitively to minor infringements of rules, e.g., if you've just told your child that you're separating and they forget their homework the next day a punishment is unfair.

Even at this age you're unlikely to be the first parents to separate. If possible see if you can arrange play dates with children whose parents seem to have split amicably. As adults we tend to seek support from others who've experienced the same problems. Children will also find comfort in being able to express their worries to someone who's been through it and come out the other side without the world ending.

There is no 'easy' age for children, although the age of the children may affect what you decide to do and how you handle the situation.

Teenagers

It's now been established that, due to the brain's efforts to change a child into an adult, teenagers are much less able to empathize with people during puberty than either younger children or adults. They will consequently make your life tough even if you have a loving, supportive partner; if you have struggles of your own, your house could quickly turn into a war zone.

Teenagers tend to think that they are the center of the world so they assume, even more than younger children that the problem their parents have are about them in some way. They may have the attitude that parents don't have 'right' to separate and try to make you feel very guilty about how selfish you are. They may even suggest that you're doing it just to upset them (seriously!). Teenagers like to think that they have the monopoly on being upset and bad-tempered so they probably don't have a lot of sympathy to spare for you. The

How to Handle Birthdays, Holidays, and Special Occasions

When you work with your ex-spouse to schedule the time that each of you spends with your child, you need to consider birthdays, holidays, and other special occasions. Many factors will need to be taken into consideration, including what occasions have had the most meaning to your family, distance between parents' homes, and fairness. When deciding on the schedule, try to put yourself in your ex-spouse's shoes and think what would be fair from his or her perspective (be honest with yourself!). If you are able to cooperate with your ex-spouse, spending certain occasions (e.g., child's birthday) together with your child can send a strong and positive co-parenting message to your child.

Children's input, particularly for older children and adolescents, needs to be given serious consideration. However, it is important that we point out that children often have unrealistic views and expectations of holidays. For example, they may want the three of you to spend time together on a holiday. Depending on the relationship between you and your ex-spouse, this may or may not be feasible.

Here are our recommendations:

- Decide for each holiday how the two of you want to handle time with your child: splitting time, rotating holidays, or rotating a holiday across years.
- Be flexible and put your child's best interest first.
  Plan times for phone calls to and from the other parent when your child is spending holidays with you.
- Decide on holiday schedules well in advance, especially if travel plans need to be made.
- Talk to your ex-spouse about gift plans for your child so you don't buy the same things.
- Realize that it might be hard for you to spend some holidays (e.g., birthday, Christmas) without your child. If your child is not going to be with you and you anticipate difficulties, make sure you plan activities to occupy your time.

only way to deal with problems in your marriage when you have teenagers is to keep as united up front as possible or, very quickly, teenagers will play one of you off against each other, which will make your life hell.

Despite the 'cool' or aggressive appearance, teenagers can be as scared and upset as younger children. Try to give them a lot of attention, however much you think they don't want it, and sit down as often as you can to talk to them seriously about what's happening. As you come to decisions, involve them and let them have some say. Teenagers think they're adults so the one thing guaranteed to make them mad is if you decide things for them.

I've found that teenagers need much more affection, attention and demonstration that they're loved than toddlers. They'll say they don't want it, and don't need you, but they are the most isolated age group in many ways. As a child we get all the time from our parents, as adults we have our partner to hug, but teenagers are too cool to admit to needing affection. So try lots of hugs in private (when no one else, not even a sibling, is around). If they really don't accept a hug give them affection in other ways. Praise (honest and not over the top) and lots of attention will go a long way to helping them cope.

Teenagers can surprise you: some will not be bothered by your separation, they've seen it all before, and they don't really think it will affect them. Double-check that they really do feel like this, then be grateful and don't try to force them to be unhappy about it.

This article has been edited and excerpted from the book It's No Big Deal Really*, permission by Anne Cantelo. Copyright © 2007.* It's No Big Deal Really *is a parent's guide to making divorce easy for children, and is recommended by the NSPCC. Her book can be purchased on* amazon.com.

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Common Questions Children Ask
(and Some Simple Responses)

By Dr. Lisa Rene Reynolds

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

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

"Why are you and mom getting a divorce?"

"There are many reasons your mom and I are getting divorced. Lots of the reasons you will not be able to understand until you are older. There are lots of things that Mom and I disagree on, and these things are so important that neither one of us can give up what we think and feel. I know it's confusing to you now, but we'll keep talking about it and one day when you're older you might be able to understand it all a little bit better."

"Do you still love daddy?"

"No, I don't love Daddy the way I used to. It takes a very special kind of love to make a marriage last. It doesn't work the same way that always loving your child works." Another response might be: "Of course I still love Daddy, but not in the way I used to. There are many different kinds of love, and the kind you need to make a marriage work, we don't have anymore."

"Why do you hate mommy so much?"

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

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

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

"Why did daddy leave us?"

"Daddy didn't leave us. Daddy left the house. Daddy left the marriage. But Daddy did not, and will not, ever leave you."

"Why don't I see my cousin Rachel anymore?"

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

If it's because a family member has "taken sides" against one parent and refuses to see that parent, a fitting response might be: "Sometimes a divorce can bring up strong feelings and opinions for other family members, and their anger or hurt makes them want a little space from the family. We'll just have to

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"Dear Judge"- Children's Letters to the Judge

Do you see your child in any of these letters?

By Charlotte Hardwick

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

Dear Judge,

I sure hope you know what you are doing cause none of us do.

~ Jordan

Dear Judge,

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

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

~ emile e.

Dear Judge,

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

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

~ Tracy and Lacy A.

Dear Judge,

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

~ yur frnd, Jamie L.

Dear Judge,

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

~ Sincerly,
Raymond O.
Don't tell Lewis I sent this letter.

Dear Judge,

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

~ Eugene E.

These letters have been edited and excerpted from the book "Dear Judge"- Children's Letters to the Judge *Compiled By Charlotte Hardwick, published by Pale Horse Publishing. "*Dear Judge*" is chock-full of how kids really feel about divorce, how they feel manipulated at times, and most importantly how much smarter they are about things than most divorced parents give them credit. For more information* www.custodywar.com *and the book can be purchased on* amazon.com.

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Child Friendly Divorce

A checklist for parents to help foster your children's long term adjustment to divorce.

By Diane M. Berry, MSW, LCSW, JD

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

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

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

Build Good Relationships with Your Children

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

Create an Atmosphere of Open Communication with Your Child

- Listen to your child
- Put yourself in your child's place
- Tune into divorce related questions
- Accept their feelings
- Use emotional regulation to help yourself and your child
- Encourage them to talk
- Engage your child in an activity
- Stay available
- Share some of your own feelings
- Use a children's book to give them information about the divorce

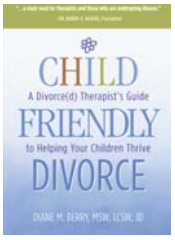
Create a Stable Home Environment

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

Limit the Amount of Change in Your Children's Lives

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

Take some time to go over the above checklist and think about how your children have been affected by your separation and divorce. At that point you can make some decisions about changes you need to make to enhance their long term stability and security.



This article was excerpted with permission from the book Child Friendly Divorce *by Diane M. Berry, MSW, LCSW, JD, published by Blue Waters Publications, LLC © 2004. Diane M. Berry, is a former family law attorney turned psychotherapist. She owns and operates a mental health clinic, practices therapy and, has been teaching the four-hour* Parenting Through Divorce *training.*

How Counselling Helps Kids

By Shannon R. Rios, MS LMFT

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

One-on-One Focused Time for Your Child

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

Someone to Share Their Feelings With

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

This does not mean that as a parent you have done anything wrong, it just means your child may have fears they feel they can't share with you. In one case, a little boy told me, "I know I did not cause the divorce but what I do know is that my parents started fighting more once I was born." So I said, "I will bet you a million bucks that if we ask your mom, she will say that was not true!" We had a deal. So we left my office and went to talk with his mom. The child was afraid to ask mom so I asked if it was OK if I asked mom and he said yes. Mom's reaction was, "Oh no, we were so happy when you arrived! We had been waiting for so long for you to come." The smile on this child's face almost lit the room. The relief on mom's face was worth a million dollars.

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

Child Feels Supported by Adult

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

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

I heard a parent pose the following scenario to an adult counselor. He indicated that he and his ex-wife were fighting terribly. He asked if they should get counseling for their children. The response from the counselor was, "Get help for you and your children will get better." I do agree with that statement but I believe a large piece was missing. I felt that we were selling out on the children. First, the truth is that some parents don't get better. Sometimes the fighting and pain continues for various reasons. If we can at least provide counseling support for the children, we can provide so much for them. Second, even if parents get counseling, their children will need someone as well. It is only fair for them to have their own focused time and process.

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

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

Sometimes children who have had cooperative married parents have the toughest time with the divorce because they completely did not expect it. A friend of mine shared her story with me when I began this work. She and her ex-husband had gone through an amicable divorce seven-years earlier. Because she was very aware and wanted her children to be healthy through the divorce, she decided to have her children see a counselor even though it was a good divorce overall, as far as divorces go. The kids attended counseling and everything went well. Her children are now 14- and 16-years old. She recently overheard them talking and asked what they were discussing. They told her, "We were saying that we want to go to college and then work with children of divorce, like our counselor." That statement is all the validation I need to know that the work I do as a counselor positively impacts children's lives.

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

This article has been edited and excerpted from the book The 7 Fatal Mistakes Divorced & Separated Parents Make: Strategies for Raising Healthy Children of Divorce*, permission by Shannon R. Rios, copyright © 2009. Shannon Rios, MS LMFT is a marriage and family therapist. She can be reached at* www.healthychildrenofdivorce.com*; and her book can be purchased on her website or* amazon.com.

To read more articles on children's issues and excerpts from *Still a Family*, visit www.divorcemag.com /articles/Children_and_Divorce.

When Did Childhood Get to Be So Stressful?

By Nadir Baksh, Psy.D. and Laurie Murphy, Ph.D.

We all have jobs to do. Some are fulfilling and entertaining, others are thankless and exhausting, but all of us, in our own way, do jobs that are important to the inner workings of someone or something. Your children go to work every day just like you do, but unlike your job, theirs takes place inside a classroom. Many parents forget how difficult school can be and minimize children's "work" as being easy compared to their own. Take our word for it, your children are not cruising by without struggles. Most of you do the same job every day, with variations on the theme, but for the most part, after you have learned what is expected, it becomes pretty much automatic. Whether you're a school teacher or a surgeon, a priest or a ditch-digger, there are few surprises and little that is new. Your children, on the other hand, are inundated with new material daily. They are required to take in that information and process, comprehend, retain, and regurgitate it on demand — on tests and in oral and written reports. Their penmanship must be excellent, the context of the material researched accurate and devoid of plagiarism, and their delivery flawless. They must possess a grasp of the spoken and written word, a comprehension of language skills, reading skills, reasoning skills, and math skills. They will be asked to sing, dance, draw, act, and debate. They will be expected to become proficient authors, voracious readers, and effective orators.

As if this isn't enough, they will also have to develop social skills, deal with peer pressure, and experience humiliation, rejection, and defeat. They will suffer from the often paralyzing fear of failing and the unimaginable anxiety that comes with test-taking. Their performance will be graded each day, without exception. They will be required to attend school when they are tired, worried, or ill. They will be given little or no leniency for personal problems, and their performance will be publicly reviewed and exposed four times each year. They will not be protected by confidentiality laws from parents, classmates, or educators as they matriculate from one grade to the next. Further, they will be disciplined as the school sees fit for actions that are real or imagined, accurate or inaccurate, until they graduate, at which time their records will follow them through college.

This is a whole lot of pressure. In fact, most of us look back on our school career and all that it entailed and agree we don't know how we made it through. Now add to your children's already overflowing plates a home environment of yelling adults, parents who don't come home, parents who are drunk, parents who are dating, mealtimes in which the children fend for themselves, and homework. Homework has become impossibly demanding, sometimes taking your child hours to complete. Then there are tests to study for, reports to write, experiments to do for science projects. Your child needs you to be focused and present to get him through his life.

If you haven't gotten the picture before, we hope you're getting it now. Your children are racing down the path of emotional burnout if you as adults don't put your needs aside to rescue them.

If you and your former spouse have kept the lines of communication open, maybe Dad could help your child with science and math, if those are his strong suits, and English and history could be Mom's department. Maybe you could even share evenings together in the same house until your child understands the material. Maybe, just maybe, you could learn to appreciate your child's situation and decide to be the adults.

This article has been excerpted from In the Best Interest of the Child: A Manual for Divorcing Parents*, by Nadir Baksh, Psy.D. and Laurie Murphy, Ph.D. Both have worked with divorce and its impact on children for more than 20 years. View their published books at:* www.parentingmanuals.com/children/Books.html. *For more information, visit their website at* www.InTheBestInterestOfTheChildren.com.

To read more articles on children's issues and excerpts from *Still a Family*, visit www.divorcemag.com/articles/Children_and_Divorce.

"Are You Able" Inventory?

By Scott Harris, Ph.D. and Richard Sherman, Ph.D.

We know that when you are going through the early phase of separation, many demands are being made of you. You are being asked to balance your own, at times, overwhelming feelings of loss, sadness, anger, and confusion with the emotional needs of your children. Sometimes it is hard to be resilient and emotionally available for your children when you are hurting.

The following ten questions will help you better understand how emotionally available you are for your children as you go through the separation and divorce process. Please circle your responses.

Are you able to talk to your partner, without anger, about the needs of your children?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Not Sure

Are you able to talk to your children on a frequent basis?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Not Sure

Are you able to visit with your children on a regular basis?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Not Sure

Are you able to actively interact with your children when you do see them?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Not Sure

Are you able to sit down with your children, talk to them about the separation and divorce and answer any questions that they have?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Not Sure

Are you able to participate in a family meeting and be sensitive to and responds to the feelings that the children nay have about the separation?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Not Sure

Are you able to recognize your own feelings about the separation?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Not Sure

Are you able to recognize when you need help for yourself?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Not Sure

Are you able to obtain support for yourself through friends, family, community organizations, and counseling services?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Not Sure

Are you able to recognize when your children need help?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Not Sure

Making Sense of Your Responses

If you can answer **yes** to **seven** or more of these questions, we believe that overall you are handling the initial separation and divorce process reasonably well.

If you can answer **yes** to only a **few** of these questions, then you are possibly still going through the shock or trauma of the separation. We highly recommend you take a step back and sort out your own feelings about the separation so that you can be more available for your children. It takes tremendous emotional strength and courage to face your own feelings during this difficult time. Do not underestimate your need to work through your own emotional discomfort so that you can be really be available for your children. Depending upon how you are feeling, this might be a good time to consider seeking counseling. ■

This article has been edited and excerpted from the book Divorce with Kids**,** *permission by Scott Harris, Ph.D., and Richard Sherman, Ph.D. copyright © 2007. Scott Harris, Ph.D., is licensed Psychologist, Adult, Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy and Richard Sherman, Ph.D., is Clinical Psychologist and they can be reached at* sharris@scottharrisphd.com *and* drrichardsherman@earthlink.net *and their book can be purchased on* amazon.com.

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Parenting Pitfalls

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

By Elissa P. Benedek, M.D. and Catherine F. Brown, M.Ed.

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

The keys to breaking this cycle are for parents to:

- take control of their lives
- create a nurturing, predictable environment for the children
- learn to deal with the children authoritatively
- be aware of some of the problems that divorced parents commonly encounter (as described later in this article).

Common Problems

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

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

Adult Regression

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

Role Reversal

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

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

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

Overburdened vs. Idle

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

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

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

Instead of overburdening their children, some parents go too far towards the other end of the responsibility scale. To assuage their guilt over the divorce, these parents exclude the children from household tasks and try to do everything themselves. Or they may use such faulty reasoning as "I had to do too many chores when I was a kid. I don't want to put my kid through that." Such selfless intentions are unrealistic from the parent's point of view and do a disservice to the child. Being assigned and expected to carry out age-appropriate tasks creates a sense of accomplishment and self-discipline in children. It's a training ground for handling increasingly more difficult demands that will be placed on them by school, other institutions to which they belong, and eventually, paying jobs.

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

Isolation vs. Activity

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

People who choose isolation may do so for may reasons: they may not be able to afford a babysitter, or they may feel guilty about leaving their children with a sitter after being away from them at work all day. Although their motivations are different, both types of parents may come to resent their children.

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

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

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

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

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

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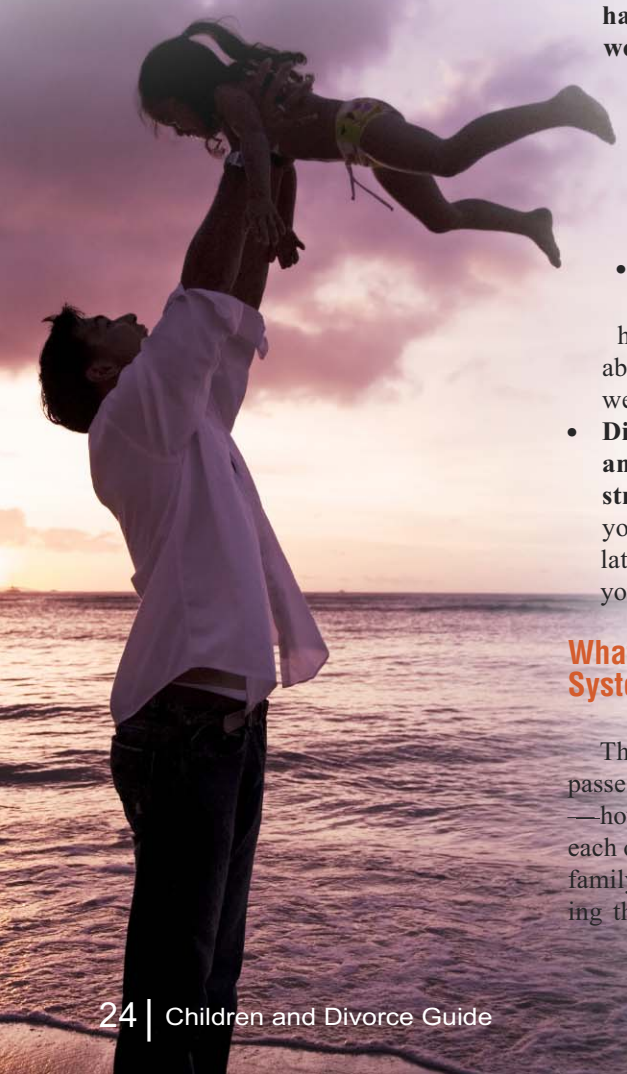
Creating Clarity from Chaos

With its new rules and routines, divorce can bring disorder to any domicile. Here's how to bring structure back to your family life.

By Carolyn Ellis

It's a big transition for children to go from living as one family with two parents under one roof to living as one family under two roofs. Logistical and organizational planning is needed to ensure the move to the "Mom's house, Dad's house" structure is smooth. You also want to make sure your children regain a sense of certainty and predictability in their two home environments. In this time of emotional distress, it's easy to let things slide: rules aren't clear, schedules aren't planned, and children pitching in with family chores may go by the wayside in the wake of divorce.



Signs that You're Stuck

- **You don't have your children's schedule planned more than one week in advance.** You and your former spouse have no clear agreement, understanding, or advance planning of when your children are with each parent.
- **Your children consistently don't have things they need (schoolwork, clothing, sports equipment) at the house that they are in.** It's a constant struggle and source of frustration to ensure your children have what they need at the other parent's house.
- **There is no consistent household routine.** Bedtimes, chores, homework expectations, and rules about electronics vary from week to week and from house to house.
- **Different rules at mom's house and dad's house cause ongoing stress and complaint.** You feel like you and your ex are being manipulated or played off each other by your children.

What's your Family Support System?

The family support system encompasses how you operate as a family unit—how you communicate with and treat each other, understanding the needs the family has to address, and understanding the role that each member has in supporting the whole family unit. This system requires ongoing attention and fine-tuning, particularly after divorce.

Children require structure. Having predictability and certainty about bedtimes, TV rules, mealtimes, and chores actually gives children a sense of security. With all the emotional upheaval divorce brings, your child may be comforted to know some things in his or her life can be counted on to remain the same.

Children want to know about some basic parameters that serve as the reference points for their life. Where will they live? Will they go to the same school and have the same friends? Where will the family pet live? When will they see Mommy, and when will they see Daddy?

Having two homes with children living in each complicates the logistics of child-rearing. Assumptions, expectations, and rules that were the foundation of a well-run family household must now be drafted, expressed, and followed. Ideally, children should feel that they have "two homes," instead of coming from a "broken home." They should be at ease in their home with either parent.

"I had no idea how much basic information I took for granted and just carried it all around in my head," explains Marcy, the mother of ten- and twelve-year-old boys. "I want my boys to learn to be independent, so what we did together was create a checklist of things to be packed. One part covered the

basics they'd need every time. The next part covered special items — things they'd need for sports teams, birthday parties, any school requirements. We've got a system in place now. I spend less time nagging them or driving things over to their dad's."

Don't Become a Cinderella

The value of having children participate in household chores is immense. Single parents may excuse their children from basic life skills like household chores and catering to their whims because the parents harbor guilt or pain about the separation. Chores build self-confidence and self-esteem in children and contribute to a sense of belonging within the family. Even the youngest child can be asked to perform a special task, like sorting their laundry or feeding the pets. The astute single parent will ensure that each child has age-appropriate chores that contribute to the family's well-being. These tasks can calm a child's fears and build a sense of stability.

Don't Forget the Discipline

Just as children need structure, they also need discipline: guidance, guidelines, rules and expectations. This should include relevant consequences if the rules are broken or expectations are not met.

Separated parents often struggle with discipline and exerting appropriate levels of authority because of guilt. Moms, who in the majority of cases have the lion's share of time with their children, worry that if she's too tough on the children they'll want to go and live with dad. Dad fears if he's too authoritarian with his children in the limited time he has them, they may not want to come back.

If your goal is to raise healthy, responsible, trustworthy, independent and loving adults who can work and play well with others, give your children the gift of discipline.

Just as children need structure, they also need discipline: guidance, guidelines, rules and expectations.

How to Create Clarity from Chaos

Take simple baby steps on a consistent basis toward your goals. You are in the best position to judge what your needs and priorities are. Here are a few simple actions to lower the chaos and increase the calm.

1. **Build simple structures**
   Identify some of the problematic routines that challenge your peace of mind on a regular basis and tackle them in the following ways:
   - Create a **process chart** so you and your children can understand what needs to happen, with whom, and by when.
   - Use sticky notes to articulate the steps needed for the structure you need to create.
   - After you've put each step on its own sticky note, arrange them in the order in which they should occur. Be sure to note on the paper who is responsible for each step!
   - You may want to use your sticky notes to create a **checklist**. You can print off your checklist, and your child can work with it until the routine becomes a habit.
   - **Charts** posted when everyone can see them are great tools for accountability for chores and responsibilities.

   Making your routines more visual and creating them with your children helps to build their buy-in and participation in the solution.

2. **Create a schedule**
   Strive to have clear communication with the other parent and with children about schedules. It's best for the adults to set up the schedule between themselves, and not have the children become the mediator of this important issue.

   Make sure you have a **central family calendar** that clearly marks when the children are with each parent. All major school, family, sporting, and community commitments should also be noted. Encourage your children to refer to the calendar so they can plan ahead. When your children are old enough, they can also add to the family calendar.

   Some single parents find it helpful for each child to have a **log book**. The book stays with the child and is used by both parents to note the child's mood and health status, provide reminders about upcoming events, and share special accomplishments.

   Your children need to know where they're going to be and to have advance notice. Having the schedule on the calendar provides a sense of predictability and stability at a much needed time.

   Be sure to spend **quality time** with your children. Turn the computer or Blackberry off, don't answer the phone, and give your child's after-school debriefing your full attention. If you can, build in some **one-on-one time with each child** so you can connect.

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Christmas morning. And when I am done, you are out of my thoughts and you will live with these rulings until your children reach the age of majority, or until you come back. When you come here to my courtroom, these children belong to me. I will hold onto this file. I'm the new daddy in town."

Certainly, by this time the parents are a nervous wreck. Something will sink into at least one of them. A good judge might continue, "You asked to be here and you still have a chance to get out. While you look like nice people, I don't know you and I really care very little about either of you. I do, fortunately, care a great deal about your children; apparently, I care more than each of you. I would never let a stranger decide the fate of my children. Now, I am going to go back into chambers and I want your lawyers to bring me as many resolved issues as possible and depending on your progress, I will decide when and how we proceed. I will be here until 5:00 p.m. and so will you, so I suggest you make the best of your day. It would be in your children's best interest for you to work all these issues out. Now, after all day, if you can't even decide on things like a holiday and vacation schedule, you surely are both going to leave here very unhappy. If we have to have a trial and if I have to make these decisions for you, I will have no qualms about any decision that I make. You may, but that is not my problem, it will be yours. Now, grow up, put your anger and pride aside, be parents. This is not a child friendly place. Now counsel, bring me an agreement on something within an hour. I know each of you highly skilled attorneys can work this out. Now, unless someone has something profound to say, we will remain in recess until you bring me an agreement on something. Have I made myself clear?"

More than likely you will be able to hear a pin drop amidst some sniffling from a teary-eyed mom or dad who may have had an awakening and be willing to negotiate in good faith. Hopefully, they will both be moved by such an "enlightening" monologue. Once the attorneys have their respective client's undivided attention, it is time to get to work. At some point in time there will be some agreement — even if the parties agree that on Mother's Day the children will be with their mother and on Father's Day they will be with their father. In building from there, they can further decide if these special days will be spent from say 10:00 a.m. until 8:00 p.m. or how about from the night before — Saturday night at 6:00 p.m. until Sunday at 6:00 p.m., for example? From there, perhaps a discussion and agreement on which parent shall provide the transportation on the Mother's Day and Father's Day exchanges would be appropriate. The lawyers can then build from there, and even the slow and tedious momentum of such "baby steps" on this path will be better than a leap of faith in a courtroom.

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

*This article has been edited and excerpted from the book "*STOP Fighting Over the Kids*", permission by Mike Mastracci, copyright © 2008. Mike Mastracci is the president of the Maryland Collaborative Law Association and he can be reached at www.MikeTheLawyer.com; and his book can be purchased on amazon.com.*

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QUESTIONS / CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11

wait and see what happens and we'll try to talk to her later when she's had some time to think about things."

"Do I have to like mom's new boyfriend?"

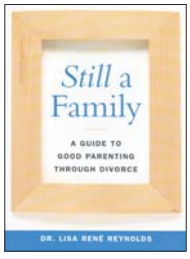
"Of course we can't make you like someone, but we would like for you to give Mom's new boyfriend a chance. It would be easier for everyone if it turned out that you liked him, even just a little bit, because he will be spending a lot of time with the family."

"But if dad lets me do it, why can't you?"

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

"When will dad stop acting like a jerk?"

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



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

To read more articles on children's issues and excerpts from *Still a Family*, visit www.divorcemag.com/articles/Children_and_Divorce.

PITFALLS / CONTINUED FROM PAGE 22

Moving On

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

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

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

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

This article has been edited and excerpted from How to Help Your Child Overcome Your Divorce *by Elissa P. Benedek, M.D. and Catherine F. Brown, M.Ed. Dr. Benedek is leading child psychiatrist and forensic expert.* www.newmarketpress.com/title.asp?id=531

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CHAOS / CONTINUED FROM PAGE 7

3. **Establish communications guidelines**
   Many parents, whether divorced or married, often make the mistake of endlessly reminding and nagging children when it comes to their responsibilities. It's important to follow up words with actions.

   Make sure your **expectations** for your children about family chores, schoolwork, and manners are clear. Identifying your steps and routines with them will help with this. If you run into problems, involve your children in some joint problem solving and brainstorming. This demonstrates that you value and respect them. Holding **family meetings** on a regular basis is a great way to build a sense of teamwork, do some planning, and solve problems together.

   When coparenting with your ex, agree on **how you're going to communicate**. Does email, telephone or in-person work best for you? How frequently should you talk? What is a reasonable response time for a request? The better and clearer your communication with each other is, the more clarity and peace of mind you'll enjoy. Your children's schedule should be included specifically in your parenting plan as part of your separation agreement. Be sure to establish a protocol for what happens if one parent is unable to be with the children on the day that the parent is supposed to spend.

4. **Make a habit of acknowledgment**
   Relationship experts estimate that it takes five appreciations to counterbalance the negative impact of even one criticism. Acts of kindness, such as appreciation, alters brain chemistry in a positive way, elevating our mood and sense of well-being. Take the time to acknowledge your children's efforts. Thank them for their questions. Thank your ex for bringing the children back to you on time. Don't forget to appreciate yourself as well! Appreciation and acknowledgment are the lubrication that will help ensure the operations of your family system run smoothly.

Excerpted with permission from the award-winning book The 7 Pitfalls of Single Parenting: What to Avoid So Your Children Thrive After Divorce *by Carolyn B. Ellis, published by iUniverse c 2007. This best-selling book received multiple National Best Book 2007 Awards. Carolyn Ellis is the founder of Thrive After Divorce and is committed to providing success strategies and resources for separated and divorced individuals. A Harvard University graduate, Carolyn is the first Canadian to be certified as a Spiritual Divorce Coach. A member of Collaborative Practice Toronto, Carolyn coaches individuals world-wide and lives in Toronto with her three school-age children. This positive and helpful book was written to give single families the strategies they need to sidestep common parenting mistakes. With compassion, humor, experience, and wisdom, the author will help you understand and negotiate your new role, so you can help your children with the transition. Written in a straightforward manner, each chapter also includes one or two simple tasks. You'll feel a sense of accomplishment, reassurance, and relief as you follow this program.* The 7 Pitfalls of Single Parenting *is available at bookstores everywhere or through the author's website,* www.thriveafterdivorce.com.

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