

# CHILDREN & DIVORCE GUIDE



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How do I tell the kids? Will they blame me? How can I protect them from the conflict? How do I know if they're OK or struggling?

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



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A young boy and girl are sitting at a table, looking down with sad expressions. The boy is on the left, wearing a light green t-shirt, and the girl is on the right, wearing a pink t-shirt. They appear to be in a restaurant or cafe setting, with a white tablecloth and a white cup visible. The background is blurred, showing a window with greenery outside.

# Telling the Kids About Your Divorce

Telling your children that you're splitting up is one of the most difficult aspects of the divorce process. Here are tips to smooth the path for you.

By Dr. Deanna Conklin-Danao, Clinical Psychologist and Child Specialist

**T**elling children about divorce is one of the most difficult aspects of the divorce process. Parents dread these conversations because of the potential impact they think it will have on the kids. While every kid will have their own reaction, there are some things that you can do to be prepared for questions that you may receive from them.

### Be Honest and Age-Appropriate

This is the key principle for answering your child's questions: respond honestly taking into account the age and developmental level of your child. Children do not need to know adult information (affairs, money issues), they simply need to know that, "We had grown up problems." Add in, "You didn't cause these problems and you could not have done anything differently because this was between us."

You need to reassure your children that both of you still love them and that will not change.

### Remember That You Cannot "Unsay" Things

Once you say something it is out there, so don't say things out of anger that you will regret later. This is harder than it sounds. Perhaps you feel betrayed by your spouse's affair and you want the kids to know it was his fault. This is too much information for a child or adolescent to process and will damage relationships. We know children weather divorce best when they have a positive relationship with both parents. Don't undermine your long-term goal because of your anger in the moment.

### Three Frequently Asked Questions

Although each family's situation is unique, there are some common questions that most children ask when being told of their parents' impending divorce. Consider preparing answers to these

three frequently asked questions since the likelihood of your children's asking them is high.

#### 1. Why are you getting divorced?

This goes back to the guideline of being honest and age appropriate. You can acknowledge things that your children might have noticed. "Mom and I fight a lot and realize that we can't live together in a healthy way." Don't provide specifics about the details of your fights; rather, emphasize that they are adult problems.

#### 2. Is the divorce my fault?

This may not be asked directly or may be asked slightly differently such as "Could I have fixed this?", but this is a deeply

**Don't promise things you can't guarantee because you feel guilty.**

held fear for many children of divorce. This fear may show itself as your child attempting to be overly well-behaved or trying to bring the two of you together in hopes of undoing the divorce. Be very clear and repeat to your kids that the divorce isn't something they caused (or could have fixed). Reassure your children that even though you are divorcing, you will both still love them and spend time with them.

#### 3. What's going to happen now?

Kids are very worried about how a divorce will impact them. Offering them honest and specific responses will help overcome these concerns. For example: "You will continue to go to the same

school." If you don't know an answer, be honest. "I don't know yet if we will keep this house, but we will tell you as soon as we know."

Don't promise things you can't guarantee because you feel guilty. For example, if the kids are in private school and you aren't sure if you will be able to afford it, don't promise it. "You will live in two different houses, but you will continue to spend time with both of us." Different doesn't mean bad, it means different. Kids will take emotional cues from both of you, so be mindful of the nonverbal communication cues as well as the words.

### Set the Stage for Healthy Co-Parenting

Consider using an Alternative Dispute Resolution process – such as mediation or collaborative divorce – or work with a divorce parenting specialist or child therapist to make sure your children's needs take precedence over your wants. This will help maintain or develop healthy communication with your spouse, which will allow you to set the stage for co-parenting in a positive manner. This will come through in telling children about divorce. Being able to communicate with each other about how you want to answer your children's questions will show that you can continue to work together – even if you are divorcing. ■



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# 15 BEHAVIORS to Watch for in Your Children

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

By Lisa Schmidt,  
Post-Divorce Coach

**F**or kids, divorce can feel like loss: the loss of a parent, the loss of the life they know, and their family home. You can first help your children adjust to this massive change by supporting their feelings, whatever those may be. It's almost impossible

to predict a child's reaction to divorce. Sometimes, as in the case of my own son, it didn't come for months.

Children have a remarkable ability to recover when given the support they need. It is important to note that lifelong belief systems and feelings

of worth are often formed in our pre-adolescent years. What you continue to reinforce or give attention to will foster beliefs and memories, good or bad. Your words, actions, and reassurances to your children of your unwavering love and support are vital.

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

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

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

## 15 Worrisome Behaviors

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

1. Sudden changes in physical appearance. Weight loss or gain is often a common side effect of stress.
2. Rebelling against normal routines, rules, or chores.

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

All too often, divorcing spouses are caught up in their own hurt or feelings and forget that children have a completely different perspective. To them, you are simply Mom and Dad.



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

You are not the unhappy wife or the workaholic husband.

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



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# Effects of DIVORCE on Children

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

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



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

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

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

### Preschoolers

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

Parents will often see children go back to early behaviors: for example, the child may want a security blanket again, or they may have problems using the toilet. There may be an increase in wanting to masturbate. They may cry, cling, or disobey. They may have night fears or fears at separation. Children may imagine strange things about why one parent is gone. Children often think they caused the break-up; they may think Dad or Mom would not have gone if they had behaved better. If a parent is very upset, a child may hide his own feelings so he won't upset the parent.

### How to Help Preschoolers

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

**Parents should also avoid conflict in front of the children. Young children will listen to their parents' arguing and may think they are to blame.**

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

Parents should also avoid conflict in front of the children. Young children will listen to their parents' arguing and



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

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

### Young Children (Ages 6–8)

Children aged six to eight years old respond most often with grief. They express their grief through crying and sobbing; this happens with boys more than with girls. They also feel a deep yearning for the absent parent. The children will miss that parent intensely, even if their relationship with the parent was

not good before the break-up. Since they don't see the absent parent often, they usually won't express the anger they feel toward him or her. They will express their anger toward the custodial parent, and they may blame him/her for the absence of the other parent. When contact with the absent parent is reduced, children at this age often believe that parent has stopped loving them. This reaction causes emotional trauma.

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

Research tells us that children are affected when they see their parents fighting. It affects their ideas about how people solve problems with each other. Children do not get used to the fighting – instead, the fighting wears them down. Physical fighting is especially damaging: children will copy their parents and hit other children.

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

### How to Help Young Children

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

### Preteens (Ages 9–12)

The response of children aged nine to twelve years old to a break-up is not the same as younger children. This age group is more advanced in their thinking, and they are able to see many points of view in the matter. Most of these children can understand some of the reasons for the break-up. They will seriously and bravely try to make the best of it.

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



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

Children at this age are likely to feel intense anger, and unlike their younger siblings, they are very aware of their anger. Anger is normal in the break-up of a family. A badly shaken sense of self is also common at this age. Children may have many health complaints or problems, including infections, headaches, stomach aches, asthma, etc. The stress the children are going through aggravates these problems. Doctors report that children from split homes come to their offices far more often than other children.

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

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

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

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

## **How to Help Preteens**

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

Parents should offer love and support to their preteens,

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Based in Athens, OH, the Center for Divorce Education (CDE) is a non-profit corporation founded in 1987 by a consortium of attorneys and psychologists. The CDE is dedicated to advocating for children and helping parents to minimize the harmful effects that divorce and separation have on children.*



# Do You Need a Child Custody Evaluation?

By Dr. Gitu Bhatia, Psychologist

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

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

However, when these conflict resolution methods fail and parents continue to have strong opposition to each other, a custody evaluator is often another person who enters into the divorce team. The custody evaluation process typically



happens after one or more court appearances where there is no progress on deciding a custody plan for the children. Please remember that in most cases it is preferable for the parents to decide where their children should spend time, but a professional evaluator is there when that cannot happen.

### What Is a Custody Evaluator?

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

### How Long Does a Custody Evaluation Take?

Depending on the situation and urgency, child custody evaluation can be rapid or extensive. For example, some fast-track evaluations happen at the courthouse, while others may take months to be completed. Each parent meets with the evaluator and the children meet with the evaluator. In the case of a brief evaluation, the evaluator gives verbal findings to the judge to assist the judge in making a custody ruling. This can happen in one day.

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

There is a written report that may be issued within a few weeks. A full child custody evaluation can take months and may cost upwards of \$25,000. The focus of any child custody evaluation is to find what is best for the children and to be very child-focused.

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

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



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

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

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

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



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# How to Recognize & Cope with Parental Alienation

By Russell J. Frank, Family Lawyer

Parental alienation is a very serious concern for many separating and divorcing parents. Here's a brief introduction to parental alienation: how and why it happens, how to recognize it, and how to restore the damaged parent-child bond.

**D**uring separation and divorce, some parents intentionally – or sometimes unintentionally – work to alienate their ex-spouse from their children. Parental alienation generally occurs when one parent sways a child into disengaging with their other parent – usually by speaking negatively about the other parent and/or refusing to permit or coordinate contact and time-sharing between the child and that other parent. It can also occur when one parent does not fully engage in co-parenting or when a child is regularly questioned about the personal life of the other parent. This results in creating a moral dilemma within the child, as many children, in the face of divorce or separation, will want to try and remain as loyal as they can to each parent, particularly the younger they may be.

For example, if a parent reacts with sadness or even disappointment when the child reports they've had fun while with their other parent, then it can likely lead to negative feelings within that child, including guilt and overall confusion about their relationship with both parents.

Other behaviors that lead to parental alienation include actions such as:

1. Listening in on phone calls or monitoring text messages from the other parent.
2. Excluding, withholding, or even purposely providing wrong information to the other parent related to a child's activities and appointments.
3. Casting blame on the other parent for their own financial woes.
4. Refusing to be reasonable with requested changes in visitation schedules, using the children to spy or report back on the other parent.

There are also more obvious behaviors such as denying access, contact, and time-sharing, or even permitting the child to determine when such timesharing should occur. The latter example can be extremely detrimental to the child, as it forces a child to choose between parents – something that no child should have to do, as these types of decisions are better left to the adults and/or the Courts.

### When One Parent Shares Inappropriate or Misleading Information with the Children

Perhaps even more concerning is when a parent decides to begin discussing, directly with the children, the actual details related to the breakdown of the parents' marriage and the ensuing legal battle. This is often done as a defense mechanism by the alienating parent as a way to curry favor with the children in an effort to further justify their alienation, but the truth is that these types of discussions and providing this type of information to children can be very destructive emotionally and psychologically.

Many times, the alienating parent will justify their behavior by telling the other parent that the children do not want to see them, something that will, inevitably, become a self-fulfilling prophecy if not addressed in a timely manner. Parents must try to always remember that they are the parent and they must remain in control of making time-sharing decisions. In

reality, up until about the time a child enters high school, and ideally after they become teenagers as well, parents should still be able to determine time-sharing issues on behalf of their child, not permitting their children to dictate time-sharing terms and conditions.

### Creating a Divide Between Parent and Child

Typically, as a result of these alienating behaviors, a physical, emotional, and many times psychological divide is created between that parent on the outside and their children. Once this occurs, it not unusual for a child to not want to communicate with, see, or spend time with that other parent. When a child refuses to talk with or spend time with the other parent, then in many cases, a child psychologist or counselor would be necessary to assist in redeveloping that parent-child relationship, something known as reunification therapy.

### Restoring the Parent-Child Bond

Reunification counseling may come in as an effective tool in helping to restore bonds previously lost due to parental alienation. In these situations, a child psychologist or counselor generally assists the child and parent in rebuilding their relationship. The counselor may recommend reunification counseling to help restore the parent-child relationship.

Reunification therapy can be used as an intervention for separated or divorced families – particularly when children are finding it difficult, for whatever reason, to visit their non-custodial parent. In the initial assessment and follow-up sessions, the counselor or therapist will identify the issues that are contributing to the estrangement between the parent and the child, and then work to develop an appropriate treatment plan for all affected family members. Through counseling, the child and parent will try to repair their relationship, usually by working on effective communication techniques and rebuilding the trust

that has been fractured by the alienating parent.

Due to the conflicts already existing between the parents, a Court order may be required in order to initiate this type of counseling. If the parents cannot agree on the counseling itself or a specific counselor, then either party may motion the Court to appoint an appropriate therapist with the underlying goal of reunifying the child and the other parent. The court order would detail the expectation that each parent cooperates with the therapy and also set parameters for extended family involvement, while providing discretion to the therapist to set the specifics for treatment, payment arrangements, and all other related issues.

In some cases, depending on the severity of the issues and the levels of distrust between the parties and/or the child, it can be beneficial for each party to have their own individual therapists, including one for the child and one for each of the parents. In these cases the therapists would work together to ensure the family reunification issues are being addressed. In other cases, however, the reunification therapist would likely spend time meeting individually with the children and then with the parents separately before meeting with both the child and the reunifying parent together.

If you have additional questions or concerns about parental alienation and its effects on your children, it's important to seek professional advice with a licensed therapist and perhaps even speak with an experienced family law attorney to discuss your specific case and circumstances. ■



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# How to Help Teenagers Cope with Divorce

Is your teen struggling to cope with your divorce? Do you know how to best support them? These tips can help your teens get through the process as smoothly and easily as possible.

By Wendi Schuller, Author and Therapist

Teenagers can be challenging during divorce as they are more likely to be stoic and keep their feelings hidden than their younger siblings who cry, are clingy, and often more talkative. There may be an obvious sign with a young child that they are stressed, such as bedwetting. Teens may not show many obvious signs that they are struggling with parental divorce, so you may need to do some sleuthing – including talking with their school’s guidance counselor – to find out how they are really doing.

**Teens can learn valuable life lessons from their parents' divorce – such as how to adapt to new situations and to look for the silver lining in challenging circumstances.**

Adolescents are undergoing physical changes with fluctuating hormones taking a toll on their emotional state, even under the best of conditions. Throw a divorce into the mix and it can be difficult to decipher what is “normal” teenage angst and what is problematic. One day they may feel childlike and the next, quite grown up.

Teens may not want to share their feelings with parents for various reasons – including not wanting to be a burden when their folks are in turmoil, or to avoid hurting a depressed parent. Teens may be angry at the two individuals causing such a drastic upset to their world.

An adolescent may become depressed and turn inwards. When this happens, they shut others out and become quieter, withdrawing from their friends, extracurricular activities, and social events they enjoyed pre-divorce.

## **1 Inform the Adults in Their Lives That You Are Getting a Divorce**

It is less traumatic if teens do not have to keep explaining the situation to teachers, coaches, and so forth. As a school nurse, I found that kids were embarrassed when they had to ask whether their testing result was for their mother or father. I would quickly make an extra copy so each parent had one but this upsetting situation did not have to happen.

## **2 Deal with Any Behavioral Changes Right Away**

Your teenager may start exhibiting marked behavioral changes. It is better to deal with those behaviors right away rather than have them escalate or become a pattern. When my son became sassy with a teacher who was similar to his father, I was called into the school immediately. My son and that teacher talked about his disrespectful behavior. Although divorce is not an excuse, the teacher listened to what was a trigger for my son. Now when they bump into each other, it is as old friends.

## **3 Look for What's Behind the Changes**

Is your teenager's behavior erratic? This could indicate alcohol or drug use: they may be self-medicating while trying to numb their emotional pain. Do they wear long sleeves all of the time? That could indicate cutting or track marks – or bruising from bullying – and the long sleeves are hiding scars and contusions from you.

## **4 Ensure That Your Teen Has Access to a Neutral Third Party**

A neutral third party can help them discuss their fear, disappointment, and what is going on in their life. It could be a family friend, godparent, neighbor, or a relative who is non-judgmental. My sons had a therapist assigned to them during divorce proceedings by both lawyers. This support was invaluable for them. They could let off steam and gently be given a reality check. If your teen is going off the rails, a session with a counselor or divorce coach can be beneficial.

## **5 Give Teens Your Undivided Attention**

This includes without your smartphone in sight. It can be easier to open up when doing side-by-side activities, such as taking a walk. These older kids may not want eye contact when expressing difficult thoughts. It is easy to get caught up in the trauma of your divorce and be significantly less available to your children. Make sure you get breaks and support in order to be there for your

kids. If you are burned out, you will be a less effective parent.

## **6 Plan Enjoyable Activities with Your Teens**

My sons and I had fun rituals that we did weekly. For example, we continued going to restaurants where the owners had known them as babies and were supportive during divorce. Splurge on a day out at an amusement park. Go to see a funny movie at the theater, as laughing is a good way to reduce stress. Music or comedy festivals can help you and your teenagers get into an upbeat mood and forget their problems for a while.

## **7 Keep Your Sex Life Private**

Teens I spoke with felt uncomfortable when their parents' dates turned into sleep overs. This is especially true when the divorce has not yet been finalized. Several adolescents became angry when their father presented his new girlfriend and said they were already a couple. When one of the lads pointed out that he was still married, the encounter turned nasty.

Teens can learn valuable life lessons from their parents' divorce – such as how to adapt to new situations and to look for the silver lining in challenging circumstances. My sons learned how to live within a budget, self-reliance, and that experiences are more important than material goods. Looking for positives – instead of back at what was – got my sons and me through divorce and beyond. ■



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# Designing a Parenting Plan

Important issues you should consider as you design your parenting plan.

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

**V**irginia Satir, a well-known psychologist in the family and divorce field, once said, “Parents are teachers of human beings, not owners of human beings.” This is a wise view to keep in mind when creating your parenting plan. Children need the love and affection of both parents, but they also need both as teachers. These roles should override your desire to “own” your children. Ultimately, you cannot own them: you can only prepare them for their future. How well you prepare them will ultimately reflect your qualities as parents.

Another well-known expert in this field, Joan Kelly, has observed that, “It is not the divorce per se, but the conditions and agreements the parents create during and after the divorce that will determine the child’s adjustment.” The marriage is over, as are your lives as Mom and Dad parenting under the same roof. You will begin new lives as Mom and Dad parenting apart.

There are three basic types of living arrangements for children: sole custody, split custody, and shared custody. The most common is sole custody, in which one parent becomes the resident parent while the other has “reasonable access.” About 70% of all parenting plans result in the mom being the resident parent – although the number of fathers becoming the resident parent increases with income.

## The Language of Parenting Plans

Most parents say they want to “win custody” of the kids. This suggests control – or possession – of the children is the goal. Instead, your goal should be to work out the best parenting plan for your children, so call it a parenting plan rather than a custody battle. The child may be in one parent’s home more than the other; refer to that person as the “primary residential parent,” not as the “custodial parent.” The other parent should be viewed as the “secondary residential parent,” not someone who just has visitation rights. No caring and involved parent wants to just “visit” his or her kids.

In split parenting plans custody of the children is divided: one or more child/ren may go to one parent, and the other child/ren the other; boys often go to fathers and girls to mothers. However, this is rare in initial separation decrees, and it generally only happens when there are unusual circumstances. It may occur when a child is old enough to choose which parent they wish to live with (age 12 in some

jurisdictions). Many people believe it is a bad idea to separate siblings, but there isn’t enough good research to corroborate this.

In shared parenting, both parents share legal control of the children. Shared decision-making does not mean shared time, which can vary from equal time (50/50) with each parent to 60/40 or even 65/35. With shared parenting, the children may live primarily with one parent but they may spend more time with the other parent than is normal in a non-shared parenting arrangement. The parent with whom the child lives most is called the primary residential parent, and the other is called the secondary residential parent.

In most areas, shared parenting is presumed to be the best plan for children. Judges must provide a strong reason if they wish to order some other arrangement; in some areas, judges have the authority to order shared parenting if they believe it would be best for the child, or if one parent requests it.

Many judges require parents to develop a parenting plan before granting a divorce. Conflict between the parents can be minimized by a written plan stating specific dates and times when each is in charge of the child; because everything is in writing, there is less need for parents to negotiate or argue. Adherence to the plan will increase trust between the parents and encourage them to cooperate in the future.

## Guiding Questions for Parenting Plans

There are several important issues you should think about as you design your parenting plan. Ask yourself:

1. What goals for our children do we both share?
2. How will we continue to be effective parents in separate households?
3. Do I only want to resolve our legal matters, or also our family issues?
4. How do we want our children to

look back on this time and on our behavior as parents?

You need to spend time talking about what goals you have for your children, what their childhood should be like, what you want them to be like both as children and adults, and what each of you can contribute to these goals. Write it down on paper and share it with your children; they’ll know that you both care about them, and they’ll see that you’re working together for their welfare. Set an example of cooperation – even though it may be a heroic effort.

Parenting is difficult under the most ideal circumstances, and it is more of a challenge when done from two households. Plan how you will coordinate your efforts: plan for the big issues (like school, religion, etc.), and plan for the small, day-to-day stuff (such as transportation, parties, etc.). You should set up regular meetings, emails, or phone calls to catch up on important developments, work out schedules, and discuss concerns.

Your parenting plan will spell out conditions and terms – some of which can be legally enforced. Take the time to design a good, flexible plan. Someday, as young adults, your children will look back on their childhood and judge how well you both handled this difficult time. They will look at how you cooperated, and they’ll remember if you put their interests ahead of your “marital issues.”

## Frequency of Contact with Each Parent

The amount of time children should spend with each parent is one of the most fought-over issues in a family break-up. It is also the most misunderstood by all involved – including parents, lawyers, and judges. As a result, parenting plans are often flawed, which can cause a great deal of emotional suffering for children.

There has been much psychological

research on children’s attachment to their parents, and the most recent findings are clear: children – particularly young children – need frequent and meaningful contact with both parents. A young child becomes deeply attached to both parents at a very early age; to be separated from either parent causes distress and can even cause trauma.

Young children need frequent transitions to ensure continuity and provide comfort. This goes against what many people assume is “common sense”, and many parents, lawyers, and judges misunderstand this fact. Although quality of contact is more important than quantity, there must be enough quantity. Infants and toddlers form bonds with both parents, and extended separations put these bonds at risk over time. Fathers, especially, are likely to drop out of the child’s life. If court orders restrict the father’s access to a young child, it may cause a decline in contact with the father over time. This decline in contact can also happen with the mother.

The ideal situation for young children is to interact with both parents daily. Some interaction is functional, including meals, bedtime routines, limit-setting, discipline, and play. After age two, most children can tolerate two back-to-back overnights with one parent. Avoid long separations lasting more than five days.

Frequent contact will mean more transitions from one house to the other. Many people – including some judges – automatically assume this is bad. They assume that frequent transitions will upset a child, and should be avoided. But there is evidence to the contrary: even a young child will get used to frequent transitions if they are not too stressful.

Unfortunately, a concept of stability – one home, one bed – for children still prevails. The concept has been emphasized too much in many courts, and it is to the detriment of the child’s other needs. They need strong and meaningful relationships with

## Unfortunately, a concept of stability – one home, one bed – for children still prevails.

both parents, and most children adapt quickly to having two homes.

Research points out that less frequent transitions may cause more stress. Children must leave the home they have been in for a week or more, and they must also leave their second parent and go “home” with the prospect of not seeing the second parent for a long time. Frequent transitions between homes eliminate this problem.

### Outlining the Issues

You must discuss the parenting plan for your child, and both parents must be clear about the issues. What assumptions should you start with? Here are the major issues that most parents face:

1. A child needs two loving, caring, competent parents.
2. Both parents have a right to an active role in their child’s development.
3. Both parents must be willing to share in the tasks of parenthood.
4. Conflict and competition over the children will hurt both them and you.

Your parenting plan should be specific; this way, everyone is clear about what will happen and when. Here are some reasons to be as specific as possible:

1. Children need predictability.
2. Parents will experience less conflict if plans are specific.
3. It is easier to recognize when a plan needs to be modified if its terms are clearly spelled out in detail.
4. The time and energy of the courts and lawyers will be better used if a plan is specific. It will result in fewer phone calls in the middle of the

night, and fewer court filings.

Finally, recognize that no plan is perfect, and most plans need to change over time as children develop and their lives and needs change.

### Flexibility Is Essential

Although parenting plans need to be specific to minimize conflict and misunderstandings, be aware that situations – and people – change over time. For most families, anger will diminish over time. Parents usually remarry or re-couple, and stepchildren may enter the picture. And, of course, your own children will age and mature. Their interests will change, and the need for parental input in their lives will also change.

A parenting plan should not be carved in stone. It is not an unchanging document, and you should be prepared to modify it over time. The truly wise mother and father can sometimes anticipate some future changes, which could be built into the original court decree. However, few of us are able to predict the future, so be prepared to work with the other parent. You’ll have to make changes when necessary, and the best way to do this is by mutual agreement.

If you cannot create a parenting plan yourselves, work with a mediator, parenting expert, or other third party. Put into your plan that you both agree to mediate before court action. ■



*This article was adapted with permission from What About the Children? A Simple Guide for Divorced/ Separated and Divorcing Parents (CDE, eighth edition, 2011) by Donald A. Gordon (Ph.D.) and Jack Arbuthnot (Ph.D.). The Center for Divorce Education (CDE) is dedicated to advocating for children and helping parents to minimize the harmful effects that divorce and separation has on children.*

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# PARENTING RESPONSIBLY ON YOUR OWN

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By Philip Dr. Stahl

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

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

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

### Stop Worrying About Criticism from the Other Parent

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

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

It is also difficult to be on the receiving end of such criticisms. If someone is questioning your parenting techniques, you should first consider whether there is any validity to the criticism. If, however, you feel the criticism is baseless after some consideration,

the key is to ignore it. Don't become defensive or return the baseless criticism yourself – just ignore it. Thus, a two-pronged approach of thinking about the criticism and learning from your mistakes, in addition to ignoring baseless criticism, is the healthiest way to deal with criticism from the other parent.

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

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

### Take Self-Responsibility

Effective parallel parenting requires taking responsibility for your own parenting to do the best job you can, while ignoring your ex's parenting. Rather than focusing on your perception of inadequate parenting by your ex, it is critical that you pay attention

to your own parenting job and attempt to improve it. If you focus on blaming the other parent, you are teaching your child to blame others for problems in his life. The best way to teach your child to be responsible is to model self-responsibility as his parent.

### Be a Parent, Not a Friend

When parents divorce, it is common for one or both to feel guilty about the breakup of the family. This guilt often causes parents to want to be a friend, rather than a parent, to their children, especially non-custodial parents who may have less time with their children than they would like. If you act too much

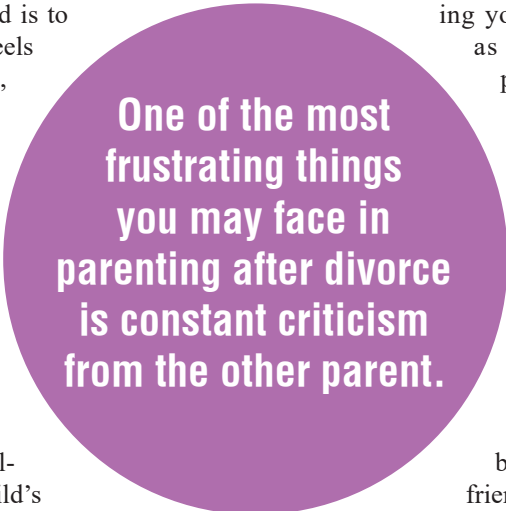
like a friend, you are abdicating your responsibility as a parent. While

parents have rules and structure, and encourage responsible behavior, a friend will be more likely to support immature behavior and irresponsibility.

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

### Disciplining and Loving Your Child

The most effective discipline is given in a loving manner, and for children



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

of divorce, this is especially critical. Research suggests that authoritative parenting is the healthiest form of parenting; it emphasizes nurturing and sensitivity to your child's feelings while simultaneously providing rules, structure, and reasonable discipline. Children whose parents have divorced may feel insecure about relationships. If your discipline is harsh, and not given in a loving manner, your child may feel insecure about your love. Rather than telling your child what she can't do, tell her what you want her to do and why you want her to do it.

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

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

Another important aspect of discipline is setting reasonable structures in the home for mealtime, bedtime,

school, homework, chores, and playtime. Don't overindulge your child because of your own feelings of guilt. Instead, encourage cooperation, responsible behavior, and healthy social interaction in your child. Be consistent in setting limits and follow through in order to maintain responsible discipline for your children.

Remember: the goal of discipline is to teach, *not to punish*. When you discipline your child, set limits, and tell her "no," you must also express your love. By disciplining your child in healthy ways, you're showing him that you love him. Showing your child love and positive attention also reduces the need to punish him, allowing you to nurture his healthy development in social relationships.

### Avoiding Your Child's Blackmail

When children of divorce spend time in two different homes, it is easy for them to pit one parent against the other. Your child might do this to encourage you and your ex-spouse to be in contact with one another in the hope that you get back together.

However, your child can also become mercenary at times, demanding things from each of you. By saying things such as, "Dad will buy me that computer if I spend more time with him," or "Mom will let me go to the dance even if my homework isn't done," your child is, in essence, blackmailing you.

As a divorced parent, you shouldn't respond differently to blackmail associated with the other parent than you

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

It's important for you to be flexible. Rigid rules increase the possibility of a power struggle where there are no winners. If your child tries to change the rules, negotiate to see if a more flexible approach makes sense. If your child is willing to compromise, and you can be flexible, it is possible to accomplish what you both want. This teaches your child that you're willing to talk out differences, attempt to resolve them, and find solutions that work for both of you. It is best if you have an initial structure and reasonable rules in your house, along with a willingness to be flexible. These standards will allow you to teach responsibility to your children while maintaining self-responsibility as parents. ■

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



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# 11 Ways to Maintain a Good Relationship with Your Children After Divorce

Divorce can be hard on your kids. Here are some tips on how to create or maintain a positive relationship with your children after divorce.

By Kathleen Shaul



**A**fter a divorce, many parental relationships are strained due to the bruised egos and feelings of failure. However, divorce, as well as separation, is much harder on the kids, as they don't understand all of the details or why everything has changed.

## **How to Build or Maintain a Good Relationship with Your Children After Divorce**

It takes more work when trying to keep children's worlds from turning upside down and staying that way after divorce. They have many feelings that they suppress at younger ages, or they may have outbursts of anger at the changing situation. All of their reactions make both parents feel inadequate in maintaining a good relationship. Fortunately, there are many tips on ways to maintain a good relationship with children after divorce.

## 1 Don't Discuss Adult Issues with Children

Your children aren't the ones that caused the divorce and are too young to realize that each ex-spouse may have less income that leads to major stress. Kids don't need to hear about the things they can't have anymore because the custodial parent can't pay for it by himself or herself.

## 2 Never Speak Badly About Your Ex in Front of Your Kids

When children hear parents that are married arguing, it upsets them too. After a divorce, each parent should try to maintain a relationship more as a friend of the other without arguing or fighting in front of the kids. This type of behavior tends to upset kids more and can lead to unhealthy reactions of all kinds.

## 3 Don't Ask Your Children About Your Ex

When the children go for a visit with the non-custodial parent, don't ask specifically about your ex. It's okay to ask them what they did or where they went on their visit, but leave out asking for personal details on the other parent. In the same sense, the non-custodial parent shouldn't dig for personal information on their ex. There is a two-fold reason for this: kids may misinterpret something and tell the other parent something that isn't quite correct or more from their point of view, which may not be true. This is the beginning of pitting your children against your ex, which should never be done.

## 4 Stay in Close Contact with Your Kids

In this day of technology, even the youngest kids are involved in the digital world. You can Skype children, even if they are very young, so they can see and hear you. For older children, keep your lines of communication open to where they can email you or Facebook you at any time. This allows them to have a more regular relationship – like when their parents were married. You can also schedule regular phone calls that work well with everyone's schedule at a time when both households are calm.

Ask your kids questions that are pertinent to their age level. Younger children pretty much go to school and go home, but you can ask about their favorite subject in school that they excel in to keep in the know. Ask older children what they did for fun or talk about movies you watched together.

## 5 Attend Your Children's Extracurricular Activities

As often as you possibly can, strive to attend most or all of your kids' extracurricular activities. Whether it is sports, dance lessons, school-related field trips or music recitals, make it a point to be there. If only one parent shows up and takes interest in these activities, the children will regret that the other parent is not there and this will cause more stress in the relationship.

## 6 Make the Kids Your Main Focus

When you have parenting time with your kids, keep anything that will divert your attention away from them to a minimum. Kids actually love to do simple things with their

parents – such as play games, go to the park, or shop for and then cook a kid-friendly meal. The chances are that if they shop and cook with you, they will be less picky eaters and have fun with food.

## 7 Invite Their Friends to Activities and Events

Children often talk to their friends about a divorce. Their friends are a part of their support system and as such, it is a good idea to invite their friends to go places with you. Whether it's a camping trip over a weekend, going to a theme park or just going to a movie, it will help your kids to become more secure in their newfound parental relationships.

## 8 Spend as Much Time as Possible with Your Kids

Try not to use a babysitter or a daycare if at all possible. If you have some event you must attend and it falls on the time when your kids are with you, try asking your ex to watch the children rather than having a babysitter do so. This can help to build the new, post-divorce family's dynamics and make your kids feel more secure.

## 9 Don't Send Messages via Your Children

Don't ask a child to relay information to the other parent. This can cause friction in the entire relationship. Your children aren't pawns and shouldn't be treated as such. Kids need to be just kids and not messengers. Asking your kids to relay messages can cause them to feel as if they need to take sides with one parent or another, which is a very unhealthy relationship.

## 10 Listen with Open Ears

Make sure your kids realize that you are concerned with every aspect of their lives. When they are communicating with you, give them your undivided attention to show how important their words are to you. You can try to guide younger children, but teenagers may push back. Don't try to control a teenager in a divorce situation, but instead listen to their worries and try to teach them how to solve problems on their own.

## 11 Be Predictable and Consistent

Make sure that you pick up or take home the children at the time you should be there. If parents are even a few minutes late, the children will likely know, even if they can't tell time yet. The stress of divorce is hard enough on all persons involved without extra stress from tardiness.

Following these tips can help you to maintain a great relationship with children after divorce. After all, everyone loses a lot in a divorce, but the biggest loss to a parent is a child and the biggest loss to a child is a parent. Live your life in a manner that guides your children to be understanding, caring, and committed just as you are to a great relationship. ■



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# Common Questions Children Ask

(and Some Simple Responses)

By Dr. Lisa René Reynolds

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





**T**he 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 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?”**

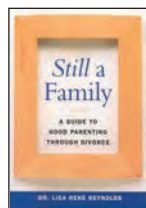
“Of course we can't make you like someone, but we would like for you to give Mom's new boyfriend a chance. It would be easier for everyone if it turned out that you liked him, even just a little bit, because he will be spending a lot of time with the family.”

### **“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.” ■



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# Forging the Path Ahead After Divorce



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

By Carolyn B. Ellis

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

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

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

## Thrive After Divorce – Do It for Your Children

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

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

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

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

## Thrive After Divorce – Do It for Yourself

Ultimately, the most important relationship you need to cultivate and heal is the one you have with yourself. Your relationship with yourself determines the quality of relationship you can have with anyone else. It profoundly affects the quality of the relationship you can have with your children as well.

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

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

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

- **Expression:** I am committed to being my authentic self. I express all my emotions in healthy ways. I feel vital and alive.

## Let's Make a Deal

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

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

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

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



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# 5 Rules for Introducing a New Partner to Your Kids After Divorce

By Terry Gaspard, Licensed Therapist

Consider how long you've been divorced, your children's ages, and how committed you are before introducing your new partner. Waiting will pay off for everyone in the long run.

One of the most common questions divorced parents ask me is: When should I introduce my new partner to my children? My best answer is to take your time dating after divorce and don't introduce your new love to your kids if you are dating casually. While it's normal to seek solace, companionship, and a sexual relationship after a breakup, it's crucial to take it slow so you can assess whether this relationship is casual or might be permanent.

## Timing is Key

The number-one thing to keep in mind when deciding when to introduce a new partner to your kids is timing after your divorce. What's the hurry? Even if both of you are in love and seem to have a lot in common, breakups are common and kids get caught in the crossfire. Next, the setting and length of the first introduction is crucial to success. Meeting in an informal setting may help your kids feel more relaxed. Rather than planning a long visit, it's best to have a brief, casual meeting with few expectations.



Another important consideration when introducing your kids to a new love interest is their age. Truth be told, younger children (under age 10) may feel confused, angry, or sad because they tend to be possessive of their parents. Renowned researcher Constance Ahrons, Ph.D., who conducted a 20-year study of children of divorce, concluded that most children find their parent's courtship behaviors confusing and strange.

On the other hand, adolescents may appear more accepting of your new partner than younger children, but they may still perceive that person as a threat to your relationship. Dr. Ahrons also found that teenagers may find open affection between their parent and a partner troubling – so go easy on physical contact in front of them. Do you want your teenager to model their behavior after you? If so, you owe it to yourself and your kids to build new relationships thoughtfully.

### Rushing Can Cause Anguish for Everyone

I've witnessed many new relationships go sour when a partner is introduced to children too quickly. It can cause anguish for everyone – especially children who are probably holding on to the idea that their parents will get back together. It may take time for your children to accept a new person in their life.

For example, Caroline, a 36-year-old teacher, described her new partner Kevin as thoughtful, affectionate, and a great match for her. They had been dating for a little over two months and she was head over heels in love with him. But she began questioning their relationship when her daughter Baylie, age eight, started complaining about Kevin coming over – especially when his nine-year-old son, Ryan, came along for the visit. She didn't understand why Baylie didn't share her enthusiasm for Kevin because he was so perfect for their family.

As Caroline spoke, disappointment was apparent in her voice: "Kevin's just so ideal for our family and I can really be myself with him. He has a son and is a great dad. I figured that Baylie would like him because he's a lot of fun and I was blindsided when she started complaining about him."

During our second session, I asked Caroline if she had thought through any disadvantages of introducing her daughter Baylie to Kevin so soon. She paused and said "not really" and so I asked her to write down a list of pros and cons for her homework assignment. When Caroline arrived for her next session, she reported that she was having second thoughts about whether she had rushed into including Kevin in so many activities with Baylie, and she realized that Baylie was seeing him as a rival for her attention.

### Here are the 5 Rules:

- 1. Timing is essential to healthy family adjustment after divorce.** Children need time to adjust to their parents' split and it can take a year or two for them to get over anger, sadness, and other emotions. If you introduce your children to someone who you are dating casually, this may complicate their adjustment to your divorce.
- 2. Remember that your kids may view your new love as a rival.** Just because you are smitten with your partner, it doesn't mean that your kids will share your feeling.

- 3. Consider your children's needs for security and reassurance.** Introducing your new love to your kids too soon can increase stress in the house and take energy away from your kids' ability to grieve the loss of their intact family. Be sure to give your kids lots of reassurance that you have plenty of love to go around.
- 4. Ask yourself: Is this person a good fit for my family?** After all, you might have great chemistry with someone, but they might not be best suited to become part of your family.
- 5. Invite your children's feedback for ideas about how and when they meet your new partner for the first time.** If you've been dating someone for a while and feel relatively confident that you are heading toward commitment, talk to your children and explain that you are dating someone who you care about and that you'd like to introduce to them. Ask them if they have any questions. Keep the first meeting short and low key. Going to a restaurant or neutral spot for the first meeting is best. Ask your kids where they'd like to go and don't invite your partner's children to join you on the first few visits.

Be sure to be careful about sleepovers with your partner when you have children living with you. Don't plan an overnight with your new partner in your home right away because it can increase rivalry between them and your kids. If you co-parent, it should be easy to spend an overnight with them when your children are with your ex. Having your new partner spend the night should only be an option once you are fairly sure that your relationship is permanent or you are engaged.

Let your children know that you have an abundance of love to go around. It's crucial that you assure your kids that your partner will not replace their other parent or change your relationship with them. Don't be surprised if your children reject your new partner at first. Some kids express anger or defiance and may even threaten to move out – or go to live with their other parent full-time. Adopt realistic expectations about your children's acceptance of your new partner. Just because you are enthralled with this person, it doesn't mean that your kids will share your enthusiasm.

### Wait Until Your Kids Have Healed

The key to successful parenting post-divorce is helping your kids heal from your breakup, and introducing them to a new love too soon might complicate, delay, or damage this process. You can simply tell your kids that you're going out with a new friend and that's enough information. Consider the amount of time since your divorce, the age of your children, and the level of commitment to your partner. Waiting to introduce your new partner will pay off for everyone in the long run. ■



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