

Helping Children Through the Hazards of Divorce

It is estimated that 1 million children a year experience the effects of parental separation, the often-overlooked casualties of divorce. The homes they live in may be sold; they may have to change schools and say goodbye to friends; their lives are basically turned upside down.

During this time when families are separating, the wife and husband can be very absorbed in their own emotions and out of touch with what's going on with their kids' feelings, leaving the kids to cope for themselves with the tremendous upheaval in their lives.

It can be a huge emotional weight on children. Numerous studies have shown that children of divorce experience high levels of depression, anxiety, aggression, lower academic achievement and trouble forming personal relationships.

But it is possible for people who need to get divorced to do so in a dignified manner that won't cause trauma to their children and to address the emotional hazards of divorce in children before problems manifest themselves.

Here are some suggestions for divorcing parents:

Deal with the divorce in a "common language." Come up with wording that both of you will use to talk about the divorce. Doing so will help reduce confusion and upset.

Don't ask children to make decisions regarding visitation or custody. This is a parental decision, made, if necessary, with the help of a mediator or the court. To ask children to choose between homes or whether they want to visit the other parent this weekend places a huge burden on the children and requires that they reject one parent for the other.

Reassure your child. Kids often fear that both parents will leave them after a divorce. They blame themselves for the split. They worry about where

they will live and who will care for them. Let them know the living arrangements, if possible after they are already in place. Make sure the children know that their parents' love for them will never change.

Don't criticize the divorced spouse in front of the children. Doing so is also criticizing the child because they share half the genes of that parent. If you have nothing good to say, don't say anything.

Confirm, respect and encourage your child's feelings. All feelings are OK. The more children verbalize their feelings, the better.

Give your child plenty of love and positive reinforcement. You're likely to be dealing with a bruised sense of self, which needs some tender loving care.

Fight out of earshot of your child. It's often difficult to do this, given the heightened emotions of divorce. But put your kids ahead of your emotions. If your partner will not agree to this, be prepared to leave or hang up if a verbal conflict escalates.

Treat your ex as a business partner in the business of raising your child. Interact with your former spouse in a way that keeps the child's interest as priority.

Accept that your child needs to have feelings of loyalty to both parents. Don't try to win him or her over to your side. Work to minimize the child's feelings of being split or divided.

Don't ask the child to keep information from the other parent. This sort of complicity is confusing and emotionally burdensome to children and implies betrayal.

Parenting is not a game to win or lose. If you would like help learning different ways to parent through a divorce, please don't hesitate to call. *

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