

# Keep Pressure Off Kids in Divorce

by Kathleen O'Connell Corcoran

**Separation** and divorce are chaotic times for families and especially for children. Children whose parents are going through a divorce often feel angry, hurt, confused, and insecure. Often parents are experiencing so much emotional pain and confusion themselves, it is hard to focus on the children's experience.

It may be helpful to understand that it is not the divorce which hurts the children as much as the parents' attitudes and behaviors. Research in the field of separation and divorce consistently shows us that children's post-divorce adjustment is dependent on: the quality of their relationship with each parent before the divorce, the intensity and duration of parental conflict during the marriage, divorce, and thereafter, and the parents' ability to focus on the needs of the children. What follows is a continuation of the previous article, additional things that parents can do to help children adjust to the reconfiguration of their family.

- Act responsibly so children are secure in knowing a responsible adult is taking care of them; for example, responsible adults with a business-like relationship do not engage in name-calling, yelling, and other emotional outbursts. Another thing to remember is not to give children the responsibilities which belong to a parent. An example of this is leaving the determination of the time-sharing schedule to a child. This puts the child in an awkward position.

For one thing, it is too much responsibility for a child. And, a child should never be asked to choose between his parents. It is far better to seek a child's input and for the parents to then determine the time-sharing schedule. If when seeking input from a child, the child tells one parent one thing and the other another thing, this is a pretty clear indication that the child is experiencing a loyalty bind.

Sometimes a child can talk with both parents together about his time-sharing preferences. This is easier to do with an older child. What needs to be made clear to the child is (1) we would like your input, (2) this is our decision, (3) please don't think you need to take sides or would hurt one of us by your thoughts or preferences, (4) it would hurt us more to think you felt you needed to protect us from your wishes.

- Do not ask a child to relay a message to the other parent. This puts the child in the middle of the parents' relationship. It also places more responsibility on a child than is appropriate. Suppose the child forgets, or loses the letter? Suppose the other parent gets angry when he or she gets the message? Who then suffers?
- Do not ask a child what is going on in the other parent's life or household. This is asking a child to violate a trust. Don't grill children about how they spent their time when they come back from the other parent's home. The children can end up feeling like it wasn't okay that they had a good time. Remember, except in abusive situations, you cannot control what the other parent does with the child when they are having their time together.

If you have concerns, express them to the other parent. If the child has concerns, encourage her to bring them up with the other parent. It might be tempting to agree with your child if she complains about the other parent, but you should tell the child to take her complaint to the other parent. You need to encourage the development of a healthy relationship with your child and the other parent.

- If your children tell you the other parent lets them stay up very late, eat donuts for dinner, and, therefore, you should too, tell your children that they will follow your rules when with you and that you cannot tell the other parent what to do in his or her house.
- Do not use a child as a confidante or depend on a child for emotional support. This is more responsibility than a child should have and also puts the child into a loyalty bind.
- Regarding secrets—do not ask a child to keep a secret from the other parent. This undermines that parent’s parenting role and cuts the parent out of significant events in the child’s life.
- Do not discuss the financial or emotional details of the divorce (or problems with child support) with the children. If they ask questions, ask them what their concerns are and then tell them that Mom and Dad will discuss them. Children need to know that their parents are working responsibly to resolve all the issues, and that they don’t need to worry.
- Try to create as much stability and continuity between households as possible. Following the same basic routines around bedtimes, mealtimes, and having similar expectations around discipline, training, homework, chores, hygiene, and diet will help children transition between households more easily.
- Give your children your time and attention. It is normal to feel like you have to entertain your children when you have time with them after divorce, but you don’t have to disrupt your life or spend a lot of money on them to make up for lost time. Be yourself and just have a good time together whether you’re doing laundry or playing checkers.
- When you cannot see your child regularly, telephone, write, e-mail, send postcards and pictures, make audio tapes of yourself reading his favorite stories, send him a video cassette of where you live, work, your pets, friends, etc. Arrange to read the same book, watch the same movie or TV show and then talk about it together. When the other parent is far away, videotape a child’s softball game and send it to the other parent. Send the other parent copies of school projects, artwork, and funny things the child said that week.
- Think of the other parent as an asset for your child and yourself. Call the other parent when you need child care, a break, or when you think the child needs the other parent. Avoid trigger words like “I let you have the kids....” or “My son....” Think and speak in terms of “sharing our kids.”
- Understand that sometimes a child will share exaggerated or fabricated information with the parent they are currently with. This is a natural event and usually an effort to please that parent. The child may be motivated out of loyalty, concern for the parent’s hurt feelings, wanting to gain favor with the parent, wanting to evoke a “mama-bear/papa-bear” response, and so on. The child is not lying but rather is attempting to survive, feel secure, diminish

fears of abandonment, and create a positive relationship with the parent with whom she is sharing time.

Divorcing parents have many financial and legal decisions they need to make about the future. Be sure you and the other parent also make a conscious decision about what kind of divorce experience you want for your children. Seek help when you need it. Community resources for divorcing parents include counseling, mediation, legal assistance, classes at Lane Community College, and support groups.

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Original publication date: 04/14/1997 – The Register Guard, Eugene, Oregon