

Parents Can Help Kids Make It Through Divorce

by Kathleen O. 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 that 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 (1) the quality of their relationship with each parent before the divorce, (2) the intensity and duration of parental conflict during the marriage, divorce and thereafter, and (3) the parents' ability to focus on the needs of the children. What follows are some things that parents can do to help children adjust to the reconfiguration of their family.

1. Parents do not have to be friends after divorce; being considerate and businesslike is more realistic. Treat the other parent as you would a business partner. Keep in mind that the "mission" of this new business is to raise the best children possible.
2. Be on time. Being late is inconsiderate of the other parent and the child. Being late can interfere with the other parent's plans and hurt the feelings of the child who is waiting for you. It can also disrupt the child's routine.
3. Stay out of conflict with the other parent. When discussing a challenging parenting issue, take a time-out, take a concern "under advisement," cool down, do some processing, and then contact the other parent with your thoughts.

There are two sides to effective parenting communication after divorce: (1) learn to raise issues respectfully and without blaming and (2) learn to respond to a parent's concerns without defensiveness and argument. You will need to learn to attack problems together, not attack each other. Former partners know how to push one another's buttons and this can sabotage a businesslike relationship. The following is a possible way to address concerns respectfully:

- Begin by asking if this is an acceptable time to talk. Make sure you can have the other parent's (and give your own) undivided attention for a sufficient amount of time to have a productive discussion.
- Avoid making statements which can be interpreted as blaming or attacking the other parent. Make a statement to encourage cooperative problem solving such as: "We have a problem; I need your help."
- Calmly and objectively describe the situation and how it is a problem for you or the child.
- Avoid interrupting. Sometimes the need to interrupt can be helped by taking notes while the other parent is talking. You want to learn to respond, not react.
- Before responding with your perspective, ask questions of the other parent and listen to his or her answers. You want to really understand the problem from the other parent's

- perspective. After both parents have shared perspectives, it's much easier to find solutions that will work for both of you and the child.
- Remember you are trying to win cooperation from the other parent to solve the problem in your child's best interests. If you blame and attack, you will alienate and invite counterattack.
 - Also remember you are having a respectful conversation because you love your children and value a cooperative coparenting relationship.
 - If you feel uncomfortable, defensive, or find yourself wanting to blame or attack the other parent, disengage before an argument begins. Take the matter "under advisement." Make a statement such as, "I need to think about this. I'll call you back tomorrow."
 - When calm, continue discussions and work together to find a solution acceptable to both of you.
 - Create an implementation plan for addressing the problem: who is going to do what by when.
 - When appropriate, take turns putting your plan/agreement in writing and share it with the other parent.

4. Never allocate the other parent's resources (emotional, physical, financial) without his or her permission. This means not signing up a child for an extracurricular activity (like soccer or a paper route) when it is the other parent's time with the child without talking it over with the other parent first. When a child is invited to a birthday party, and he is supposed to be with the other parent that day, have the child call the other parent and make the arrangements with that parent. It is so easy to get involved in these situations; try to remember that this is the child's business, not yours.

5. Avoid talking negatively about the other parent when the children are present. Children love both their parents. Very often, children need "permission" from a parent to have a good relationship with the other parent. Encourage the children to have contact with the other parent.

If a child complains about the other parent or the other parent's household, encourage her to discuss it with the other parent and let her know you are confident in her ability to work it out with the other parent. "Dad really loves you. I think you need to let him know this is bothering you. I'm confident that you two can work this out together."

When one parent speaks negatively about the other to a child or acts disrespectfully toward that parent, the child will pick up on that behavior and attitude, and act it out with the other parent (and you). Help your child have love and respect for both parents.

6. Help a child understand that Mommy and Daddy are getting a divorce, not Daddy (or Mommy) and the child. Parenthood lasts a lifetime. Avoid language like, "She left us."

7. 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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