

**PARENTING
THROUGH DIVORCE**

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1

RELEVANCE OF DIVORCE TO CHILDREN

There are few adults and parents who are not aware of the challenges and potential difficulties that divorce imposes on children. There are literally thousands of books written about the impact of divorce on kids, both from a positive and a negative perspective. The good news out of this rather depressing research is that parents, through their actions both towards their children as well as towards each other, have a huge influence on how children will adjust to the divorce both in the short and long term.

No parent going through a divorce needs the added stress, anxiety and worry of how their actions are negatively affecting their children. By understanding how to minimize the negative aspects of divorce for children, knowing the typical responses of children to divorce, and working with the other parent to maintain the loving, nurturing environment that a child needs through the divorce, parents can help children to adjust to their new lifestyle. Stressing parent co-operation and communication with regards to raising the child or children is critical, but so is being civil, respectful and positive towards the other parent with regards to their abilities to be a wonderful Mom or Dad to the child.

Many parents struggle to help their children cope with the emotional pain of divorce and learning to live with Mom and Dad in two separate homes. Very few children, or parents for that matter, find that the time they get to spend

together is enough. Mom and Dad working together to accommodate each other schedules and the schedules and needs of the kids will help in addressing some of the inequity that is inherent in co-parenting through a divorce and after.

Divorce is no longer an uncommon occurrence in most countries of the world. While countries in North America tend to have higher divorce rates than other developed and developing countries, there are still some common trends and numbers to divorce around the world.

PREVALENCE OF DIVORCE

It is estimated that the overall divorce rate in the United States is approximately 51% and in Canada it is 48%; Japan's divorce rate is about 27%, Australia is around 40% and Great Britain has a divorce rate of about 38%. The number of divorces per year tends to be increasing in many areas, with second and subsequent marriages having a higher overall divorce rate than first marriages.

As the number of divorces continues to rise in most areas and countries, so does the cultural acceptance of divorce. In the United States alone about 1.5 million children will experience divorce every year, and these are only kids that are recognized through the courts. In many cases such as step-parent divorce, the child may not be included in these numbers because they are not included in the dissolution of the marriage. Step-parent divorces can be just as problematic for the child, however, especially if they were close to the step-parent and saw them as a support person in their life.

RELATIONSHIP WITH EACH PARENT

Perhaps one of the most damaging side effects of divorce is the lack of parental involvement by one or both parents with the children through the divorce. If parents are not able to put their children's needs and emotional security in front of their own they run the risk of destroying the relationship with their kids, thereby increasing the chance that the children will have emotional and behavioral problems directly related to this damaged relationship.

It is concerning to note that:

- 40% of all children that experience a divorce do not have regular contact with their biological fathers within one year of the divorce
- Kids living with a single parent are more likely to live in poverty, more likely to be involved in gangs and criminal activities and less likely to graduate from high school or obtain a college degree
- Children that don't have a mother and father role model in their lives are more likely to engage in high risk behaviors, become sexually active much earlier, have lower self-esteem and seek attention from others rather than being satisfied with their own feelings of achievement
- 75% of all teenagers at chemical abuse treatment programs are from single parent families and report infrequent or no contact with the non-custodial parent
- According to research children of divorce that live with one parent and have no contact with the other parent are at greater risk for certain health conditions such as asthma (almost 50% higher risk),

headaches, speech problems, learning difficulties, separation anxiety issues and school related behavioral problems

- Kids that have routine, constant and positive interactions with both parents on a frequent basis have the fewest health, emotional and behavioral problems
- Children with both parents involved in school progress and contact, even when they are divorced, have higher graduation rates, better grades and are less likely to drop out of school

The research is very clear. It is not so much the divorce itself that causes the stress on the children; rather it is disengagement or neglect of one or both of the parents that is damaging to children. Both parents have to work together with each other and the child to ensure that the relationship between both parents and the child remains strong throughout the separation and divorce as well as in the years to follow.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SIBLINGS

During the divorce the relationship between brothers and sisters or step siblings can become damaged, just as the relationship between parents and children can be affected. Many older children are called on by parents to provide additional care for younger brothers or sisters, and this can really lead to resentment from the older kids.

Sometimes younger children may also try to assume parenting roles with younger siblings if they see Mom or Dad becoming stressed or incapable of taking on a parenting role. It is critical to keep things as normal as possible

between the siblings in the family; don't ask kids to assume roles they are not ready for or roles that they resent. There is naturally going to be some tension between kids, especially if one child is very angry or upset over the divorce and is refusing to communicate or spend time with a parent. Keeping the lines of communication open, speaking positively about the kids and to the children and encouraging them to keep on being good brothers and sisters to each other is critical to maintain their relationship with each other.

2

MODELS OF PARENTING DURING DIVORCE

Since there are such a large number of families experiencing divorce, there has been and continues to be a huge amount of research completed on the topic every year. Professionals that work with families in divorce (including Child Development Specialists, Consultants, Family Therapists, Play Therapists, Psychologist and Psychiatrists) all conduct routine evaluations of how different types of parenting styles or models impact on children. This research indicates that there are basically three models used by parents in most areas, although they may be known by different names in different countries. For purposes of this discussion these parenting models will be known as:

- Independent Parenting
- Parallel Parenting
- Co-Parenting

The models are discussed from the most distant type of model to the highest level of communication, collaboration and dual parent interaction with regards to the children. Parents may find that in the initial phases of the divorce when the emotional level is high, the first two may be more practical and manageable, but parents should be working towards the third model, the collaborative co-parenting model as the ultimate parenting through divorce goal.

INDEPENDENT PARENTING

Independent parenting is really exactly what you may expect the term to mean. In this parenting arrangement each parent manages their own rules, expectations and day-to-day routines with respect to the children when the children are in their care. To avoid confusion, having custody of the children will be known as parenting time in this book. So, in independent parenting models, when it is Mom's parenting time she makes the rules, sets discipline and handles all issues without consultation with Dad. Dad likewise sets rules, develops discipline policies and handles the decisions when the kids are with him, again without consultation with Mom.

Most parents, especially those with older children, can quickly see that this can be a potential disaster in the making. The problems with independent parenting models are:

- Kids quickly learn Mom and Dad are not talking or collaborating, and may take advantage of the situation by play both parents off each other. In the worse case scenario these kids will be literally living two lives disconnected from each other without the ability to talk about or comment on what is happening in their other home.
- All children need structure and predictability in their life. This model may not provide any structure or predictability, especially if Mom and Dad have very different views of parenting. Kids may be highly confused if rules, expectations and discipline are vastly different between homes.
- Kids don't have the opportunity to continue to see and understand both parents are working together; rather they clearly see that Mom and Dad are in conflict and not interacting. This may teach children all

the wrong skills needed to be effective communicators and problem solvers in their own lives.

In very high conflict situations independent parenting may be first step or model that most parents use. Working with a family therapist, communication or conflict coach, parenting co-ordinator or other professional can help parents get back on track with communication and positive and productive interactions with regards to the children.

PARALLEL PARENTING

Parallel parenting is still a limited interaction model between the two parents, and is the one most often used by parents in the period directly after the divorce. In parallel parenting both parents work together to achieve the same goals for their children.

A great way to picture this is to think of a railroad track. Each parent is one rail of the track, both heading in the same direction to make sure the train (or child in this case) gets to the same goal destination. Parallel parenting requires that parents have a common understanding of what each other are doing in their respective household with regards to the kids, and they ensure that what they are doing is similar. There is limited interaction or communication between parents, but children have predictability, structure and routine through their parenting time with both Mom and Dad.

Often parents that are using a parallel parenting model will have a written parenting plan, which is a document that outlines the various aspects of raising their children. Parenting plans will include details of the children's lives such as parenting time schedules (access and visitation in legal terms), routines, discipline, medical issues, supervision, and extra financial

considerations for special events and even issues of daily routines and extracurricular activities for the children.

Communication between parents may be through attorneys, therapists or counselors, mediators or even via email if personal contact is still stressful. In most cases parallel parenting is beneficial to the children since they have security, routine and the understanding that Mom and Dad are working together in their upbringing and care.

CO-PARENTING

The most child friendly model of parenting through divorce is the model most commonly known as co-parenting. In this model Mom and Dad continue to discuss issues as they relate to the child or children, interact routinely with regards to information specific to the kids, and often talk and/or phone each other with questions or concerns about the kids. While parents may not specifically spend time together with the kids, many co-parents attend birthday parties, school events and other special activities together to allow the child to feel very much a part of both parent's lives.

Many people feel that co-parenting is an unreasonable expectation for divorced parents, however research clearly indicates that this is the best possible model for your children, provided both parents can remain civil, respectful and child centered during discussions and interactions. Co-parenting is almost like operating a business with the other parent as a partner with the goal of raising the happiest, healthiest kids. Co-parenting does not mean that you have to have extended conversations about anything other than the kids' health, happiness and general well being and development.

Co-parenting requires a lot of effort on both parent's part. Whatever caused the break up of the marriage has to be put aside or in the past, with all communication between the two parents now related to bringing up your children. Anger and frustration may occur, but effective co-parents use anger management and communication techniques to minimize or eliminate any anger towards each other in the presence of the children.

3

RESPONSES TO DIVORCE BY CHILDREN

All children, no matter what their age or developmental stage will experience some effects of the divorce. In the case of very young infants they may not express these issues verbally; however you may notice a change in behavior during the divorce and then may see other issues later as the child matures. Older kids may indicate they accept the divorce, but there may feel torn or hurt about the breakup of the family.

UNDERSTANDING THE GRIEF CYCLE

Typically children will go through a grief cycle when parents divorce. Each child, depending on their age, their personality and their ongoing contact or lack of contact with both parents will experience divorce in slightly different ways.

Most kids will experience the following phases during the divorce and the time period of about a year immediately after the divorce. Each child will be slightly different their expression of these phases or stages, but typical reactions will include both emotional and behavioral changes that can be worrisome and even problematic for parents.

DENIAL

Kids in denial simply don't want to accept the fact that Mom and Dad are getting a divorce. During the denial stage, and all through the divorce, parents have to be very positive about the other parent and must keep any explanations about the divorce or separation simple and to the basic issues as they relate to the kids. Important questions to answer include:

- Where the child is going to live
- When the child will get to see both parents
- Ongoing expressions of love from both parents towards the child
- Good, positive and respectful comments about the other parent
- Simple, concise explanations about divorce that are age appropriate and not negative about the other parents character or behavior

Most kids will be in the denial stage for 6-8 weeks, sometimes longer if there has been a previous separation. If humanly possible set a schedule of parenting time immediately so the child doesn't feel rejected or abandoned by either parent.

ANGER

Kids will be angry going through the divorce for several reasons. These can include:

- Anger at themselves that they may have done something to cause the divorce
- Anger at a parent for leaving the home
- Anger at a parent for making the other parent leave

- Anger at the changes in their life
- Anger at being moved from Mom's to Dad's house and back again with no regard for their schedule , desires or wants
- Anger at lack of control in their lives
- Anger at the feelings of rejection and abandonment they may feel

ANXIETY

Kids often show anxiety in their behaviors more that they express it in words. Children showing anxiety may be more likely to:

- Have emotional outbursts at family members or at school
- Have eating, sleeping or behavioral disorders
- Complain of headaches, stomach aches and fatigue
- Need to have constant reassurance
- Want to be close to a parent all the time
- Insist on sleeping in the same bed or room as the parent
- Experience nightmares, anxiety attacks and withdraw from activities

CONFUSION

It is very normal for children to be confused about what is happening through the divorce. Whenever possible provide lots of structure, predictability and routine between Mom's house and Dad's house to eliminate or minimize confusion. Calendars, agendas, text messages, email reminders are all good ways to help keep children informed of the information they need to know regarding time with Mom, time with Dad, who is picking them up or where they are to go after school or on the weekend.

Be prepared to answer a lot of questions when kids are in this stage and do not become frustrated if you seem to be answering the same question over and over. If you find this is the case, try developing a way to help the child remember, turn it into a game or post messages on a board in the house to help keep things organized.

BARGAINING

Most children will go through a phase where they may attempt to bargain with Mom and Dad, or even a higher power, to attempt to bring the family back together. They may also bargain between brothers and sisters or between other family members to attempt a family reunification. It is important to keep kids focused on being kids and to keep reinforcing that they did not cause the divorce, nor can they "fix" the problem and reunite Mom and Dad.

DEPRESSION

Depression with children is common through divorce. They may seem to lose their sense of spontaneous joy, their ability to see the good in things, or their love of a particular hobby, pastime or activity. Encouraging our kids to stay involved and active and modeling being positive and future focused is the best option. Both parents need to let kids know that things are going to be different, but that they will still be loved, cared for and cherished, even though Mom and Dad are living in different homes.

If you are concerned about your child's emotional or mental state, seek a counselor or consult with your physician. Often speaking to someone outside

the family that can help normalize the divorce for the child can help in overcoming any sadness or depression the child may be experiencing.

ACCEPTANCE

Once children accept the fact that the divorce is happening or has happened, and see that Mom and Dad are still Mom and Dad, still active in their lives and in their loving, supporting families most children will adjust to the divorce situation. Most children will take about a year to reach acceptance with Mom and Dad are co-parenting and communicating. The more conflict, negativity or neglect children experience from one or both parents the longer it will take them to accept the divorce and be able to look forward to their relationship with both parents.

4

AGE GROUPS AND ISSUES

The preceding chapter outlined the grief cycle that children go through in a divorce and this chapter will identify the typical behaviors and reactions that occur in children of different ages going through a divorce. Keep in mind that every child is different both emotionally and developmentally and not all children will react the same way. Children may be more emotionally or socially mature or immature than others in their age group and the information below is a general guideline only.

As a parent if you have any concerns about your child's behavior or emotional health going through a divorce, be sure to consult with your pediatrician to ensure there is not a medical issue; then ask for a referral to a child therapist or play therapist if there are no medical issues.

BIRTH TO FIVE YEARS

Often very young children between birth and five years of age initially seem to go through the divorce very easily and are accepting of the parenting schedules and changes. This may be largely due to the fact that they are not yet aware that this isn't the norm; however when they get a bit older they may start to display the grief cycle, even though the divorce happened many years ago.

Children at about the age of two are starting to develop a sense of trust and predictability in their world and their environment. When changes occur,

often they feel like their world is out of control, leading to an increase in tantrums and emotional displays of frustration, anger and anxiety. Parents at this time need to keep routines between Mom's house and Dad's house as similar as possible, and both parents need to interact frequently with the child. Ideally the child should communicate with both parents every day either in person, by phone or even over webcams on the internet. The more that young children understand that they have a Mommy and a Daddy in their lives the more secure and loved they will feel, even at this young age.

Pictures of the child with both parents as well as a photograph album or other reminders of the relationship between both parents and the child are critical. It is especially important for the parent with the most parenting time, which is often the mother, to talk about the other parent frequently, reminding the child that both parents are working together providing security, love and attention. Young kids may also be shy or timid the first few times they spend time with the parent that has left the family home, so both parents have to be encouraging and supportive of this parenting time.

SIX TO EIGHT YEARS

In a lot of the divorce research and parenting information the six to eight year old kids are known as the "parent pleasers". They really do want Mom and Dad to feel good about themselves and to be emotionally happy and content in their new lives. These kids tend to want to talk about one parent to the other parent, and it is very critical to allow children to say positives and to feel good about the other parent in your home. Avoid sarcasm or questioning as this can cause the child to feel uncomfortable.

These kids also need to have their own feelings validated. Even though as the adult you may be relieved, thankful or even optimistic about the divorce, it is likely that the children at this age are sad and are feeling a sense of

loneliness or helplessness during the divorce. Listening to them without judgment and allowing them to have their own feelings about the divorce and talking to you about them is critical. You may find that a counselor works best with this group of children as they may not really tell you what they feel because they think it will make you sad or upset. They can, however, talk to stranger that has no emotional stake in the conversation.

NINE TO TWELVE YEARS

The kids in the nine to twelve year old range tend to respond rather strongly to the divorce for many different reasons. One of the major issues is that they are struggling with their own identity - not quite children yet not quite teens either, so emotional changes hit this group particularly hard. It is not uncommon for children of this age to feel powerless, betrayed and rejected through divorce.

Nine to twelve year olds are also more aware that there may have been problems in the family, especially if they overheard some hostile or negative conversations between Mom and Dad. They may have already made up their mind that one parent is to blame for the divorce, which may make them feel that the "bad" parent needs to be punished by rejection. Often kids at this age decide they are not going to have any contact with the parent that they see as at fault for the divorce. Ultimately this actually harms the child as he or she needs to have both a mother and father in his or her life. Even the parent that has the child's full support must actively encourage and even facilitate the ongoing relationship between the child and the other parent. Typically once the child understands that Mom or Dad is still a good Mom or Dad they will be willing to engage with that parent, which only helps to maintain a loving relationship rather than resulting in a breakdown of that relationship.

THIRTEEN TO EIGHTEEN YEARS

Older children tend to respond to the divorce in two distinct ways. The first way is to see the divorce as something between the parents, and continue to have a good relationship with both. The second way is to see one parent as the victim and one as the villain, and simply refuse to interact with that parent. Again, it is very important to facilitate, encourage and even actively promote the interaction of the child with the parent, even if it is short or brief interactions.

Often the older children will volunteer to take on additional roles to help the family. It is critical that kids do not see themselves as responsible for the care and well being of the parents or siblings through the divorce. While they may volunteer to do a bit more, they should never feel obligated to become an adult in the household. It is critical for both parents to remember that these mature children are really just kids, and they need to have time for themselves.

Keep in mind that keeping the lines of communication open and spending time with your child each day discussing their accomplishments, concerns and questions can help both parents stay in touch with their children as well as address any concerns or problems the kids may be having. It is common for children to speak with one parent or the other, so parents must be able to communicate their children's concerns, interests and problems with each other so they can work together in a cohesive manner.

5

COMMUNICATION BASICS FOR PARENTS

Learning how to change your communication patterns through divorce can be challenging, but it is undeniably in the best interests of your children. Many parents willingly indicate that they would be more than happy to change their communication style from one of conflict to one of collaboration - however the other parent will never change, so what can they really accomplish?

The answer in one word is EVERYTHING. Communication is a two-sided activity, so if one person changes their tone, message, body language or attitude, it will automatically have an effect on the other party. The great news is that there are several techniques that you can use to change your communication style to decrease conflict and improve the quality of your interactions with your co-parent, whether they are aware of the techniques or not. In addition, all these techniques can also be used with your children or in any other type of stressful or difficult conversation in your life.

REFRAMES

Reframes are a way of summarizing both the emotion as well as the content of the other person's message, plus adding on what you think they would like

to see differently. This has a way of allowing the other person to feel validated, allowing them to understand that you get their point, and then moving the conversation through to a problem solving mode rather than getting stuck in the blame or "its your problem" mode.

The example below outlines how a reframe can be used:

Mom: I am sick and tired of always having to clean all the kids' clothes when they get home. Just because you never had to do the laundry when we were together doesn't mean that you don't have to do it now. I don't appreciate this pile of laundry to do every time you bring the kids back here.

Dad's Reframe: You feel frustrated that I bring the kids back with their laundry not done and it seems to you that you aren't appreciated. It also sounds like it would be better for you if I did the laundry at my house, is that right?

OR

Dad's Reframe (2): You feel stressed having to do all the kids laundry when I bring them home, seems like you don't feel appreciated. Sounds like this is a real problem for you I hadn't considered. If I did it at my house, would that help out?

Either option is likely to result in Mom and Dad solving this problem together, rather than resulting in an escalation about the laundry and Mom's stress at having to get it done.

Reframes are short, easy and relatively simple, but they do require that you are actively listening to the other person and trying to really hear what they are saying, not just looking at what the surface issue may be.

"I" MESSAGES

"I" messages are taught in most communication classes and even assertiveness trainings. They are really a more formulated response that includes some of the same elements of a reframe, just with more detail and specificity. "I" messages are great for more complex problems that need more information and possibly even more problem solving and collaborative skills.

The formula for an "I" message as it applies to something happening that is causing a problem or distressing the children follows this pattern:

I feel (an emotion word) when (something specific happens) since it affects the children by (give a specific example of impact on the kids). I would like to talk about (specific positive change in behavior), can we agree or discuss this further (when will it happen)?

A good example of when to use an "I" message might be if one parent is chronically late to pick up the kids. Instead of being hostile and ready to give the other parent a piece of your mind when they arrive at the door, how about calmly stating:

I feel frustrated when the kids aren't picked up on time since it affects the children by causing them to have to wait and worry that they might miss their chance to spend time with you. I would like to talk about what time will work best to be consistent with their pick-up; can we agree to discuss this by phone on Tuesday at 8:00 when the kids are in bed?

Using the formula gives you a chance to rehearse and practice the "I" message and prevents you blurting out a negative or hostile comment that is likely to cause the other parent to become defensive, resulting in the same old negative communication styles. Children overhearing this conversation

will see Mom and Dad problem solving through communication, not arguing and accomplishing nothing.

PARENTING ROLES VERSUS MARRIAGE ROLES

It is critical to separate the roles of an ex-husband and ex-wife from the roles as co-parents. Keep in mind that this is now a business relationship of raising your children in the most positive, calm and supportive environment possible for your kids. Whatever negative issues caused the divorce, they have to be put into the past and into perspective. The marriage roles as husband and wife are over and restructuring to be co-parents is going to take some adjustment. If you have a lot of negative thoughts and feelings towards the other parent, seek help and counseling for yourself. This will only help you be a better co-parent and help support your children through this restructuring process. Kids that see Mom and Dad being civil and respectful of each other will adjust to the divorce much more quickly than those that see ongoing hostility and anger.

Avoid asking personal questions, questions about finances that don't apply to the children or about new relationships if this is a sensitive area. If you do need to discuss a potentially hot button topic, do it when the children are not present or absolutely will not be able to overhear the conversation. Remember, even telephone conversations can be harmful for kids to overhear if parents are upset or angry.

6

TALKING TO KIDS ABOUT DIVORCE

One of the toughest things that most parents report through the divorce is having to actually sit down and discuss the divorce with your child. Many older kids may be aware that there was some stress in the family and may be expecting the divorce and they may be less surprised or angry about the decision. Typical questions that kids may have when Mom and Dad talk about divorce include:

- Why are you doing this?
- Don't you love each other anymore?
- Where will I live?
- When will I get to spend time with the other parent?
- What does divorce mean?
- Do you hate each other?
- Do you still love me?
- What am I supposed to tell my friends?
- How will this change my life?

Answering these questions and providing security, reassurance, love and support for your child or children is essential at this time and in the ongoing conversations you are likely to have with them about divorce.

HOW MUCH INFORMATION IS TOO MUCH

Ideally parents need to sit down together and decide what information they wish to share with their children with regards to the divorce. Generally kids need to know only what directly applies to them that would include:

- Where they will live
- How often and when they will see both parents
- That both parents still love the children, care for them and will be part of the children's lives on an ongoing basis
- Any changes that may occur in their home/school/ extracurricular activities
- Lifestyle changes (e.g. eating out once a week instead of all the time)

Kids do not need to know and should not be told:

- Why the other person is a bad spouse/ parent/ partner
- Any negative feelings, thoughts or opinions about the other parent
- What part other people may have had in the divorce (affairs, new relationships, etc)

- Intimate details of the divorce
- Financial disclosures that are beyond the basics
- Child support payment information
- Character flaws of the other parent

Older children may ask more adult type questions, but it is still important to not get involved in being negative or "bashing" the other parent. Not all questions that children ask can or should be answered if the only way to answer is a negative. Kids will want an answer; however it will only cause more harm and further place the child in the middle of the conflict by providing this information. If you are consistent in your answers children will soon understand that you are not going to talk about the intimate or negative details of the divorce and will feel less conflicted about the other parent.

DISCUSSING DIVORCE

If at all possible kids should have the opportunity to discuss the divorce with both parents, together. This ensures that the children and the parents are hearing all the information and providing consistent information to the children. If kids get mixed information from Mom and Dad this will increase anxiety and confusion throughout the process.

Sometimes a family therapist, religious leader, counselor or even a family member can help as a mediator or advisor to the family to have these

difficult conversations. The worse case scenario is to not have the discussion at all, which really does leave the children confused and highly stressed.

Reading a book about divorce with your child can also help. Check with your librarian or school counselor for a list of books on divorce written specifically for children.

ACTIVE LISTENING

Active listening is a critical skill in communication. It is the process of using all your powers of observation as well as your actual hearing to understand what the other person is really saying and meaning. Active listening is critical with kids that may not be able to express themselves with words. Watch for signs of stress, anxiety and distraction when talking about divorce that may indicate that the child is not ready or willing to hear and absorb the information.

Parents that use active listening skills will:

- Talk to the child in a comfortable, distraction free environment for the child
- Turn off the TV, cell phone, pager, computer, headset or other devices and just focus on the child
- Encourage communication and allow the child to express what they feel, even if it is not what you want to hear
- Ask non-judgmental questions for clarification and more information
- Never criticize the child or make them feel unimportant

- Validate the child's feeling and clarify their misunderstandings or questions in a gentle, supportive way

FUTURE FOCUSED

Staying future focused and ending conversations about future goals will really help your children, although they need time in the conversation to talk about the past and the now. Talk about Mom and Dad's relationship with the children and how it can grow and improve and stay positive about the future. Kids will take their cues from how parents are acting, talking and confirming, so set a positive example when you have a conversation with your child.

Allow children to have some input as to their life in your home. Kids love to be involved in planning and activities, so use this as a way to engage them in their time with you at your house. Instead of talking about the past, look towards the future and new traditions and activities you all can enjoy together.

7

COMMON PITFALLS AND TRAPS

No matter how hard people work to be terrific co-parents, there are always some communication pitfalls and traps that can catch parents by surprise. By understanding and recognizing the loopholes and possible mistakes that can happen when co-parenting, you are using one of the best ways to constantly assess your communication with the other parent. It avoids having your children getting involved in any conflict, misunderstanding or negative aspect of the divorce.

BECOMING DEFENSIVE

Keep in mind that sometimes, even when using reframes, active listening, "I" messages and focusing on the positive and collaborative aspects of the co-parenting relationship there is still the potential for finding yourself in defensive mode. Once you become defensive you are no longer willing to hear what the other person is saying and you are more focused on defending yourself with a retort or remark that you are with hearing what message is being sent, even though it may be communicated poorly.

If you find yourself becoming defensive because of what your co-parent is saying, immediately get curious about your reactions. You may have to ask for a minute to calm yourself and get back on track. This can be accomplished by simply saying "I really want to hear what you are saying and I need a minute to just consider your comments. Do you mind if we just

take a short break?" During the few minutes that follow, calm down by taking a few deep breaths and thinking about what the other person said that got you in defensive mode. Identify what it was and address it so that you can put it behind you and listen when the conversation starts again. This may be a self-conversation, not out loud but in your head that sounds like:

"Ok, when I hear that same old comment about my not being on time, I get so upset. What I need to remember is that my being late is affecting my kids, and I want to be a good parent. I accept the fact that I was late and this upset the family, so I need to listen and suggest a way to prevent this in the future. "

Becoming defensive is a natural emotional way to protect ourselves from things we don't want to hear. In some cases they may be valid, but in others they may not be accurate at all. Arguing with the other parent about what opinion is right and what is wrong is likely not to solve anything, plus it will be extremely counterproductive to the collaborative atmosphere you are trying to foster. Being right is not as important as keeping your kids out of conflict.

KIDS AS CAREGIVERS, SUPPORTERS OR MEDIATORS

Sometimes kids try to help out the parents by acting in an adult role in the communication between parents. They may also try to act as a caregiver, supporter or cheerleader for one or both of the parents. It is very important to prevent children from assuming these roles, as it can only lead to stress, anxiety and a decrease in the parent child relationship over time.

Most issues around the divorce and the parenting of children are parent issues, not open to debate, confirmation or approval of the children. Allowing children to make decision, mediate or arbitrate parent conflicts is one of the most damaging aspects of divorce. Parents need to make important life decision together, without the children, but in consideration of the children. Kids should not be asked the following questions:

- Which parent they want to live with
- How much time they want to spend with each parent
- If they want to see the other parent
- Which house they want to live in
- If they want their siblings to go with them to spend time with the other parent
- What don't they like about the other parent/ parents new partner, etc.

Kids often will try to minimize conflict by avoiding the topics they know cause angry responses by either parent. Carefully monitor what issues are not being discussed, as well as those the kids willingly bring up with you. Don't question them about why they do or don't discuss the issue, but perhaps work with the other parent to ensure that you both have a complete picture of what the kids are concerned about.

KIDS AS SPIES OR MESSENGERS

Children should not be responsible for giving messages to the other parent, or for sharing potentially unhappy news with either parent. In many cases the parent simply doesn't want to deal with the co-parents angry response to a change in plans or situations, so they have the child communicate the message. Not only does this put the child in a no win situation, but there is also an increased likelihood that the message will be relayed incorrectly or incompletely, leading to even further hostility. Consider using email or even regular mail to communicate possible high anger issues so you have time to think about what you want to say and the other parent has time to think about how they want to respond. This also keeps the kids out of the situation completely.

Kids are also sometimes used as spies to find out about financial issues, new relationships, new jobs or even new friends at a divorced parents house. Keep in mind that kids are not spies, and this really provides a moral dilemma for children. They know they are not supposed to tell the parent what information they are looking for, but they also know that lying and sneaking is wrong. If you have personal questions direct them to the other parent when the children are not present, then accept the answers and move on.

MONEY ISSUES THROUGH DIVORCE

Most families will experience a decrease in their disposable income during the divorce and for several months to years afterwards. Keeping kids as far out

of the money issues caused by the divorce is important. Topics that should not be discussed or addressed in front of the children include:

- Child support amounts
- Lack of funds for basic needs for the child
- Lack of payment of child support
- Financial stress and concerns that you have as parents (bills, mortgage payments, car loan payments, etc)

What is reasonable to discuss are:

- Realistic budgets (eating out only once a month or not ordering in food all the time)
- How much allowance or spending money children will receive (in factual ways, not by blaming the other parent)
- Ensuring children that Mom and Dad have things under control with regards to finances

If finances are a concern contact a financial planner or recognized credit counseling service and work with a professional to help get on the right financial management track for the sake of the children and your peace of mind.

8

PARENTING PLANS

A divorce is a tough emotional time for most adults and it is often a time where people don't make the best decisions or act in the most adult and mature manner. Emotions are running high, people are feeling hurt, lost and sometimes betrayed and the future may not look very bright or rosy. Since this can be a turbulent time for parents, sitting down and taking the time to write out a plan for raising your kids that both parents will follow can really help parents start to co-parent and respect each others role in the emotional well being of the children.

Doing this plan on your own is the most collaborative way and the lowest cost way; however mediators, attorneys, parenting co-ordinators and family therapists can all be hired to assist the parents in writing a plan. In some cases a religious leader or family friend that both parents trust can act as an informal mediator or consultant to the co-parents.

WHAT IS A PARENTING PLAN?

In some areas a parenting plan is an actual component of the divorce and is filed with the court to show how both parents have agreed to parent the child or children. Even in areas where a parenting plan is not required by the court it is a still a working document that is a tool for parents to provide consistency, routine, security and stability for their child or children throughout the divorce and the years that follow.

A parenting plan can include be a simple handwritten document or it can also be one of several template type documents that are available for free over the internet. The more involved and detailed the parenting plan is the less room for misunderstanding or misinterpretation there will be with regards to the plan.

If the court in your location requires a parenting plan they will usually have a standard format that they use. For parents that are sitting down to complete a plan on their own for consistency in co-parenting, a simple bulleted list under the various headings or topics is often all that is required.

WHY DEVELOP A PARENTING PLAN?

If parents don't communicate on a regular basis, a parenting plan is the guideline or reference book for how each parent has agreed to raise the child. Even if parents do communicate on a regular, positive basis a parenting plan allows both parents to know how different issues will be handled at the other parent's house, taking the guesswork out of decision making.

The other aspect of parenting plans is that you will no longer see the child interacting with the other parent in his or her home; there will be no opportunity to talk about child rearing issues like you did when you both lived in the same home. By taking the time to sit down and discuss the main issues of parenting, you will understand, without actually seeing, how the other parent is reacting and handling issues, as well as being able to also

express your wishes as to how they could or should be handled from your perspective.

A parenting plan benefits the children by:

- Providing security and predictability
- Making discipline and routines similar in both houses
- Ensuring kids are getting the same message in both houses
- Assuring parents that "good" parenting is important in both houses
- Avoiding the children playing one parent off the other with regards to chores, routines, bed times, etc
- Lets kids see that Mom and Dad are still Mom and Dad and are working together in their life

WHAT SHOULD BE INCLUDED?

At the very minimum a parenting plan should include:

- When, where and how children will be exchanged between parents
- What happens if the schedule has to change, how much notice is needed, who explains changes to the kids?

- Daily routines including chores, bedtimes, homework completion, meal times, television, video or computer access limits and restrictions, allowances, use of the car, what type of discipline is acceptable and what is not
- Medical decisions such as what happens if the kids are too sick to exchange, what happens if a parent is sick, is time made up, who decides when time will be made up to the parent that missed their time with the child?
- At what age can kids be left alone without adult supervision, for how long, who gets to baby-sit, what about if step-parents are involved?
- Who decides on extracurricular events - who pays, who goes, who buys the additional supplies?
- How will holidays be handled that provides the least stress for the kids? Who will talk to other family members, how do extended families fit in over the holiday seasons? What about longer holidays or taking the child out of the country, state or province?
- When can kids be introduced to new partners? How will new partners be addressed by the kids, by the co-parent?

There are lots of other possible topics, but these are hot button topics that tend to cause the most conflict.

HOW OFTEN SHOULD IT BE REVISED?

The answer to how often the parenting plan needs to be revised is really a decision best made by the parents themselves. Obviously bed times, chores,

supervision issues and extracurricular issues have to change over time. A parenting plan for an infant will be focused on more concrete things, whereas a parenting plan for a teenager may include curfews, use of the car, what is or is not allowed as a video game or other issues that are far different. Typically a parenting plan should be reviewed and revised every six months to a year to ensure that it is accurate and an effective tool for co-parents.

9

TOPICS OF CONCERN

No matter how much you read study and discuss possible issues and concerns that may come up regarding your children through a divorce, there are also issues that you neglected to realize or couldn't have possibly foreseen happening. The wonderful news is that, if you have developed a good co-parenting relationship you don't have to handle them on your own - you will have a co-parent to turn to for advice, information or even for support.

Developing a strong, positive and respectful co-parenting relationship will help minimize any potential problems in raising your children, although it does not eliminate all areas of concern. Being aware of options, guidelines and resources that both co-parents can take advantage of to help resolve these difficult situations is important.

HOW TO HANDLE TOUGH CONVERSATIONS WITH KIDS

As a parent there are those tough conversations looming out there that you dread having with your children. Conversations about the divorce, about new relationships, about your future and the way that Mom and Dad are going to work together are all challenging for most adults. In addition you will have to have the conversations all parents have to have about sex, drugs, alcohol,

values and morals, poor choices, future goals, school grades, friends, why everyone else gets to do something and your child can't - you know the list.

There are some general tips and strategies to keep in mind when having these challenging conversations:

- If at all possible, have the conversation with the other parent present and participating or at least in strong agreement with your comments and opinions. This may mean meeting in advance or talking over the phone to get on the same page.
- Use active listening skills and try to maintain your emotions, or take a break and regroup if you feel overwhelmed or stressed in the conversation.
- Decide what you will and will not discuss with the child before starting the conversation. Don't get tricked into falling into negative communication patterns or in being negative about the other parent if that comes up in the discussion.
- Rehearse what you want to say. You may even want to make a few notes so you ensure you cover the points you want to make.
- Don't rush into the conversation. Most conversations about the tough topics don't need to happen immediately. Think, plan and talk to the other parent before proceeding.

WHERE TO GO FOR HELP

Get help from a friend, family member, spiritual leader, counselor or therapist if you don't think you can do this on your own and the other parent

can't be there for support or feels as overwhelmed as you do. There are many professionals that can help children and parents of divorce in communicating these tough topics.

Another option may be to check with a school counselor, mental health service provider or a parenting organization to see if there are parenting support groups or parent-child support groups located in your community. Many churches and schools do offer parenting classes or drop in parent meeting that can help with ideas, moral support and experience in broaching these tough conversations with kids.

3 CHALLENGING QUESTIONS YOUR KIDS WILL ASK AND HOW TO ANSWER

At one point in time or another most children of divorce will ask three questions that are very difficult for parents to answer. It is a bit like walking on a tightrope if you think about the information as the rope and both parent holding the rope, one at each end. The child is the tightrope walker and if you give too much information or not enough, they will become off balance and fall. Giving the right information to help the child stay balanced is the key to successfully answering the question.

1. Why are you and Mom/Dad not together anymore?

Answer: I know this is stressful for you and that things are hard to understand. You need to know that we both love you very much and are going to still be Mom and Dad, even if we aren't living in the same house. The divorce is not your fault and as Mom and Dad we are going to continue to work together for you and be the best parents we can be. The reasons that your Mom/Dad and I got the divorce are between

us and are private, but you need to know that you had nothing to do with the decision, other than we both want to make this as easy as possible for you both now and in the future.

2. Do you think that you and Mom/Dad might get back together?

Answer: I can understand that this may be confusing and it is important for you to keep in mind that we both love you very much and you are the most important thing in our lives. Us getting back together as a husband and wife is not going to happen, however that doesn't mean that you and I won't have a great relationship and your Mom/Dad and you won't have a great relationship. I know I am and your Dad/Mom is going to work really hard to make sure that you feel very loved and cared for, even through this change in our lives.

3. If you and Dad/Mom stopped loving each other, how do I know you won't stop loving me?

Answer: Your Dad/Mom and I will always be here for you as your parents. We will also work together to make sure you are cared for, loved and have everything that you need. Even though the marriage is over, my relationship with you as a daughter/son will never change. I will always be your Mom/Dad, it is something that means everything to me and I will work every day to show you just how important you are to me and how much I love you. I know that your Mom/Dad feels exactly the same way I do and is working just as hard to make you feel loved.

Different ages of children will ask these questions in different forms; however your answer should always be positive and loving, not negative about the

other parent, and should always include both parents' perspectives in the answer if at all possible.

10

FAMILY MEETINGS

Since co-ordination, cooperation and communication are the cornerstones of co-parenting through divorce, one of the best ways to demonstrate these attributes is through the use of a family meeting. Family meetings are used in many different cultures and can be in many different forms from a very traditional business type meeting through to a very informal and casual type of discussion.

While family meetings are often only recommended for older children and teens, there is really no reason why younger children cannot be involved in at least some component of a family meeting, although they may not enjoy sitting through the whole meeting.

WHAT IS A FAMILY MEETING?

A family meeting is a scheduled meeting or discussion that allows the parents and adults in a child's life to get together when needed to discuss issues that relate directly to the child or children. Typically family meetings may be held monthly, bi-monthly or even less frequently, often dependent on where the parents live as well as the number of kids in the family and their respective ages. Typically family meetings include someone that acts as a chairperson and manages the meeting based on some agreed upon rules of procedure. Voting is often part of a family meeting and allows children to have input as to decisions that are directly related to them.

Many people wonder why a family meeting is better than just a phone conversation. Think of it in the old cliché, "Actions speak louder than words"; while it is important for kids to hear that Mom and Dad are working together on their behalf, it is even more important for them to actually see this happening. Family meetings provide that type of visual reminder to kids that Mom and Dad are still co-parenting and are working together to raise them.

WHO SHOULD ATTEND?

This may seem like an obvious answer, but basically the entire family should attend a family meeting. This means Mom, Dad, the kids, maybe the grandparents if they routinely watch or care for the children, perhaps the babysitter, nanny or a day care representative, perhaps even step-parents or other family or non-family members that play a significant role in the child's life. Whoever is at the table has to understand that they must treat everyone there with respect and civility, and that negative comment, destructive comments or generally inappropriate behavior is not acceptable. Typically once co-parents have managed to iron out their communication differences, have a parenting plan and are ready for a family meeting they will already have a good idea of which people need to be at the meeting.

WHAT CAN BE DISCUSSED?

Again, anything relating to the children can be a topic of discussion at the family meeting. A great idea is to set an agenda which kids, parents and other invited guests can all contribute ideas are topics for discussion at the meeting. Having the first meeting to establish the rules for family meetings is a good way to get started. Possible issues to discuss at this first meeting include:

- How the chairperson is assigned (rotation, nomination or the same person all the time?)
- How does the speaker get recognized to speak (talking sticks, raising your hand, going in order around the table)
- What are the rules for the meeting (length of time, tie breakers, voting, making amendments)
- Will notes be kept and who will do this? Where will the record be kept or will they be emailed to everyone?
- General meeting rules and locations

Generally most family meetings are not designed to only talk about problems and issues. They are also a time for co-parents to celebrate their children's accomplishments and victories. Try to end each meeting the recognition and awards part of the meeting as well as encourage kids to reward and recognize each other.

KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL FAMILY MEETINGS

To ensure your family meetings go as planned consider these five simple keys to success:

1. Keep it short and simple. Start with a 20-minute meeting and increase as children understand the process and what will happen.

2. Keep the meeting positive. If the entire meeting is negative, kids will quickly disengage from the process. Talk about success and positives and how they relate to prior meeting agreements and decisions.
3. Serve food. A family meeting with pizza and ice cream is much more enjoyable than one without.
4. Invite others to the meeting, especially those that are important in your children's lives. The more adults the child see supporting him or her the more loved, secure and cared for that child feels, especially through a divorce.
5. Encourage the kids to participate. They need to be actively involved in the process, contributing ideas and making suggestions in a problem solving fashion.

While family meetings take time, organization and patience they are very rewarding for both the adults and the children in the family. Consider trying a short family meeting and then getting the kids involved in planning and organizing future meetings to help them see that the family is still working together in their best interests.

CONCLUSION

It's clear to see that those children who fare the best through the process of divorce are those who have two parents who are prepared to put their differences and disagreements aside in order to continue being the best parents they can be.

No one is saying that the process itself is easy, but with continued work and some give and take between the two parents you can enjoy a better relationship with their children and make the process of them growing up as smooth as possible.

No matter how much you may try to work against it, divorce is a fact of life and it can and does happen to couples for various reasons every single day. When there are children involved the processes that the couple must go through need to bear them in mind before anything else.

It is in everyone's best interests to remain civil and polite during every stage of the divorce process, and taking a step back before you consider your response to any given situation quite often results in a better outcome for all concerned.

And especially for the children.