

Parenting for the Children During and After Separation or Divorce

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Separation and divorce is challenging not only for divorcing people, but for the children. When there is animosity and bickering children often get caught in the cross-hairs. While the parents are trying to deal with their own elevated emotional reactions and responses to separation and divorce, the emotional needs of the children can easily be disregarded.

Unresolved conflicts are often the justification of separation and divorce and disagreement over parenting may be one of the major conflicts. The longer the unresolved conflicts over the parenting, the more and more diametrically opposed parents become in their approaches. Both parents believe that their own "approach" is right and the other parent's approach is "wrong". When parents disagree on child rearing principles, philosophies and techniques, it is easy to see how those differences could translate into inconsistency and confusion across households. Children may be subjected to two different sets of rules and standards. These differences may be stark "black and white" differences. How confusing would that be? Try to find middle ground instead.

The decision to separate or divorce does not happen lightly. Everyone concerned has a range of emotions about the relationship, the future, other relationships, and one's place in the world. Unfortunately, as individuals deal with these feelings, their insecurities (i.e., anxiety) can be acted out by vying for the children's loyalty, affection, and positive feelings. It can be very damaging when parents want the children to take their "side" in the conflict, and to be mad at the other parent. The non-custodial parent may attempt to reclaim their children's affections by becoming the "Disneyland parent" where weekends are spent doing extraordinary activities and the children are provided with unending entertainment.

Additionally, many people have learned to show love with gifts. Parents may be tempted to buy their children things to show love or as a gesture to somehow make up for separation and divorce. Often, the other parent, believing this to be an attempt to "win over the children", feels resentment, and may engage in a "contest" over children's affection. All of these things are confusing to the kids. They may enjoy the extra goods, services, and entertainments, but it's only a temporary distraction from the pain of separation.

Although divorcing parents may have animosity toward the other parent, it is crucial that both parties work together to provide for the best interests of their children. In order to

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do this, parents must be able to cordially and effectively communicate regarding the children. The kids are still going to be going to dance classes, selling cookie dough, having school programs, have math homework due, etc. All of these activities may require a certain amount of communication and coordination between parents. Children cannot be expected to relay the information between parents. It is appropriate for parents to have a plan in place for communication about these logistical issues. The normal activities of a child's life are not about the parents' unresolved relationship issues. They are about the child's life. There is a vast array of communication methods available: online calendar, fax, email, voicemail, phone calls, skype, face-to-face. The method you choose should be based on level of conflict or comfort.

Despite the best intentions of all parties, issues do arise that necessitate a change in plans. A certain amount of flexibility is called upon for all parties. Regardless of whether you think your "rights" are being violated, if the best interests of the children are paramount, a little flexibility helps for smoother transition and adjustment for the children.

It is important to remember that the parents are not the only people in children's lives. Special effort should be made to accommodate a child's need for the other significant people in their lives. They want and need to continue to spend time with grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins on both sides of the family. If they can, it might be helpful for them to stay in the day care they have been attending since birth. Any other accommodations that can be made to reduce the amount of change in their lives, could be beneficial.

Divorcing parents are going to be tasked with making decisions in their children's lives for a very long time. It is crucial that they be able to do so in a collaborative and cooperative way. Divorced parents who refuse to speak to each other, make their children's lives unnecessarily more difficult.

Regardless of any unresolved negatives feelings that you have toward your ex-spouse, don't bring your children into it. Be respectful, civil, and positive about the other parent--regardless of what you think of him/her. Even if you believe that your children "know" what a "rat" your ex-spouse is, don't say it. What seems obvious to you is not universal truth. Avoid making any negative comments about your ex-spouse to your children--even when you believe your ex-spouse may be making nasty statements about you. Take the higher road and put your children's interests before your need to be understood.

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