

Avoiding Collateral Damage: Avoid Inappropriate Co-Parenting to Protect The Children During Divorce

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Divorce and separation are challenging times for everyone involved, especially children. When parents become entangled in animosity and bickering, they often harm their children, making them collateral damage. As divorcing individuals wrestle with their own tumultuous emotions about the relationship, future, other relationships, and their place in the world, they can easily overlook their children's emotional needs.

Parenting disagreements are significant conflicts that often lead to separation and divorce. The longer these conflicts persist, the more opposed parents become in their approaches, creating confusion for the children. When parents disagree on child-rearing principles, philosophies, and techniques, it's easy to see how these differences can result in inconsistency across households. Children may be subjected to two sets of rules and standards, leading to stark "black and white" differences. Finding a middle ground, rather than getting caught up in conflict, is essential for moving forward in a healthy way.

The decision to separate or divorce is complex, and everyone involved experiences a range of emotions, from anxiety to depression. Unfortunately, as individuals cope with these feelings, insecurities can manifest as competition for the children's loyalty, affection, and positive emotions. When parents use their children for their gain, it can be very damaging. The non-custodial parent may try to win the children's affection by becoming the "Disneyland parent," providing endless entertainment and special activities during weekend visits. Additionally, some parents buy their children gifts to express love or remorse about the separation.

Often, the other parent resents this, perceiving it as an attempt to "win over" the children, leading to contests to assert affection. Through all this, it's easy to see how children may become confused, enjoying the extras but only experiencing temporary relief from the pain of separation.

Parents must work together to act in their children's best interests despite the animosity. Although divorcing parents may have unresolved issues, they must cooperate on logistical matters for their children's sake. Typical communication necessities include school activities, homework, extracurricular engagements, and more. Parents should not use children as messengers between them. Instead, parents should establish a communication plan before separation or divorce, using email, phone calls, online calendars, or video conferencing platforms such as FaceTime, Skype, or Zoom. Choose a method that ensures comfort and reduces conflict for everyone.

Despite the best efforts of all parties, unexpected issues may arise that require plan changes. It's crucial to remain flexible and prioritize the children's needs before acting. Regardless of whether they feel their rights have been violated, parents must always put their children's best interests first. Flexibility during transitions and adjustments leads to smoother experiences for the children.

Parents must also remember that they are not the only people in their children's lives. Children may have relationships with grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins on both sides of the family. Maintaining communication and time with these extended family members is essential. Any other accommodations that minimize changes in the children's lives can also be beneficial. For example, keeping children in the same daycare they have attended since infancy or finding a similar arrangement can reduce disruption.

For a long time, divorcing parents must make decisions in their children's lives. It's vital to do so collaboratively and cooperatively. Divorced parents who refuse to communicate with each other make their children's lives

unnecessarily difficult. Avoid involving your children in any unresolved hostilities toward your ex-spouse. Be respectful, civil, and optimistic about the other parent, no matter how you feel about them. Even if you believe your children "know" what a low-life scum your ex-spouse is, refrain from telling them. What seems evident to you is not a universal truth. It's best to avoid making negative comments about your ex-spouse to your children, even if they make nasty statements about you. Take the high road, put your children's interests first, and resist the urge to justify yourself to them.



Divorce is one of the most stressful events that anyone can go through. The emotional toll can be overwhelming. The resulting anxiety, stress, and worry may seem impossible. You're not alone if you find it challenging to manage these emotions. To help you navigate these challenges, consider exploring the resources on our Anxiety, Stress, and Worry page. There, you'll find articles on techniques for grounding yourself during panic attacks, breaking free from negative mental loops, mastering stress, and more. These tools can help you regain control and enhance your well-being during this difficult time.

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